

# CONTEST IN NANAI SHAMANIC TALES

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## ABSTRACT

The tale motif of the shamanic tale competition is examined with due regard for the interpretation given by the Nanai storyteller-shamans from the standpoint of their personal spiritual experience. In shamanic practice it is not the personal ability (skill or physical power) that provides a challenger victory in conflict, but obtaining spirits-helpers more powerful than those of his or her rival. The predominant role of these fantastic personages/helpers in tales explains the losers' unconditional submission and readiness to sacrifice their freedom or life to the winner. It also clarifies the motivation of the initiators of these contests and games: by means of gathering a great number of competitors, such personages (shamans) solve their personal spiritual problems, such as the need to overcome their adversaries or find allies in the struggle against their opponents.

KEYWORDS: folklore • shamanism • Siberia • Nanai • contest • shamanic games  
• inter-shamanic conflict

## INTRODUCTION

The motif of contest is typical to the Nanai *dzorgil-ningmani* tale (a tale about shamanic roads in the spiritual world or, briefly, a shamanic tale). The hero of these tales learns that somewhere far away, someone has initiated a contest, and together with the numerous other people who are interested in participating, he sets off on a journey. The guests who participate in such contests never fight against each other; rather, the host and organiser of these games fights duels with each of the visitors – before the story's hero appears, nobody can beat him. Thus, he who becomes the only winner, will be the hero.

The purpose of such a tale contest seems enigmatic. The games are not only held to entertain and for someone to achieve personal superiority because penalty for the numerous losers is too brutal. In some tales, when the hero comes to the place of competition, he sees the heaped human bones of his predecessors, beaten in the games by the master of the competition. "Around the dwelling there were lots of bones: 'You see! Your wife has killed in competition a lot of people!'" (Sunik 1958: 137) In the other tales, the winner forces the losers to transplant all the residents of their villages to his place. "Lots of villages [and their villagers] have arrived; [the losers] have fetched them" (Avrorin 1986: 139).

On the beach, there appeared a big village. All the losers have removed there together with all the dwellers of their villages. She has already won almost forty

people. The village has become very big. She said, "as I won, all of you are going to move to my place. I am going to have all of you". (Alexei Kisovich)

Nobody forces people to participate in such unsafe competitions, so it seems incomprehensible, why people prefer not to ignore the rumours about these games and set out on a long journey in order to take part in such risky events. What is more, why do they submissively and without demur agree to lose their freedom and even life if they are defeated?

It is even more obscure that the hero, who finally wins the competition, sometimes refuses reward. For instance, he can choose not to move the host-loser and all the loser's villagers into his village and gain power over them. "Take us as your servants!" "No, we do not need servants; you have your own home, so go home!" (Avrorin 1986: 37) In some tales, they suggest the conqueror marries a woman (the host's daughter or sister) without a dowry as a reward for winning, but the winner also refuses. In the tale *The Horse's Son*, one of the guests says to the host, who lost the contest, "give your daughter to him [the winner]!" However, the winner replies, "brother, no, I do not want to, I do not need a wife. Marry her yourself!" (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 70) If the tale hero refuses all rewards, why then did he participate in a competition that risked his freedom and life?

It is hardly possible to answer these questions by limiting the research to folklore texts. However, it is quite another matter if we examine them within the wider context in which Nanai shamanic tales exists, i.e., within traditional Nanai shamanic praxis, which contains the practice of contests.<sup>1</sup> Until the mid-1990s, the hidden underlying meaning of the tales was still clear for the practicing Nanai shamans, because tales, according to shamanic conception, fix the information received from the spiritual world. Moreover, in certain situations, the very production of new shamanic tales, *dzor-gil-ningmani*, results from certain shamanic ritual needs.<sup>2</sup> This gave me the opportunity to consult practicing Nanai shamans about their personal experience connected with inter-shamanic contests and ask them under what circumstances their real experience can become encoded into the corresponding tale motif.<sup>3</sup>

#### BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS. VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE PARTICIPANTS IN THE COMPETITIONS

Before the 1930s, big public competitions were popular among the Nanai.<sup>4</sup> The games were held during the ice-drifting time on particular river beaches. Waiting for the ice on the river to go so that it would be possible to fish, people sacrificed pigs and cocks and held contests in jumping, in raising and throwing heavy things, and in running. Eaters were challenged in their speed of eating and in the quantity of food consumed.

The characters in the tales compete in similar events, which are hyperbolically exaggerated. They run with the speed of flying ball, jump from the sea beach onto the small island in the middle of the sea. "People contest; those who are strong move [a stone] over their shoulders; those who are strong, move that stone round their waists; and that stone is as big as a barn" (Sunik 1985: 122). Preparing for contest by cooking large quantity of food, a tale personage boils in one of the coppers "seventy bears' heads and thirty heads of other animals" and in another copper "he boils porridge of one sack of green

bristle grass". Then, in one of the heats, he competes with a guest, demonstrating that he is able to eat all of this (Ivan Torokovich). Meanwhile, in spite of improbability of the tale characters' physical abilities, the storytellers insist that there is nothing invented in such stories. According to their opinion, the abilities of the tale personages just seem to be fantastic, but actually, they are real, because tale events happen both in the physical world, *ilu*, and in the spiritual world, *dorkin*.<sup>5</sup> Another reason why such abilities seem to be real is that, according to the shamans' explanation, not all the tale personages are human. Some of them are spirits, which are only occasionally able to appear in physical aspect. In the same way, when the shamans' spirits enter the spiritual space, their shamanic abilities essentially become different from their normal physical ones.

For the Nanai, shamanic tales are typical shorn of so-called 'epic distance'. The shamans affirm that what they experience during their praxis is very similar to some tale events because they are shamans who 'compose' the first variant of a tale, and in some tale episodes, shamans allegorically open to the non-initiated people some of their secret information. The audience can perceive that the story as something invented for entertaining, and in this case the narration crosses the border of hidden shamanic discourse and starts being passed from one person to another, finely being turned into a tale.<sup>6</sup> Researchers describe this transformation in a similar way: "A narration from the first person that is a memorate can later start being formed into a fabulate because of retellings by neighbours and acquaintances [...]. Further on, it turns into a complete sample of folklore narration." (Kharitonova 2007: 173) However, for some initiated persons the tale is like today's newspaper in that it is concerned with the latest topical events. My informants categorically disagreed with me when I explained to them that the tale actions, as scholars interpret them, should represent an unreal world that is distant in space and time, and the narration should be "fictional, impossible in reality and opposite to what is evident" (Putilov 1999: 95).<sup>7</sup> This clash between the scholar's and the shamans' opinions can be explained by the fact that researchers try to find in the tale some correspondence between the epic plots and the events of the physical world (*ilu*), while shamans compare epic events with the real (for them) but invisible and unknown (for the others) spiritual world (*dorkin*), which they penetrate in their dreams and rituals.

The tale also narrates events only partly reflected physically, the decisive part of which occurs in the spiritual realm. Therefore, the tale personages who want to be victorious in tale games must rely not so much on their physical strength as on their spirit-helpers. Fighting against an old man, the hero of the tale *Coffin* grabbed him, tore him limb from limb, and

threw him so that he broke up into eight, and the parts of his body scattered around; he broke up into nine and the parts of his body scattered in the air. However, soon after, the parts of the old man's body joined together and the old man got up safe and sound. (Ivan Torokovich)

The hero finally managed to kill the old man only after his spirit-helper in bird shape brought him an egg, in which was the soul-life of the old man. Only after breaking that egg was he able to kill. (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 57) The strong hero of Ivan Torokovich's tale grabbed his rival, an old man, raised him up and turned him around his head (the hero was incredibly strong!) and threw him far away. However, the old

man returned to life, because the hero did not discharge the most important clause of the tale's duel: he relied on his physical strength instead of accepting aid from his spirit. Spirit-helpers are invisible, but are the most important and active participants in tale games. Not only do the spirits affect the scale of the games, but they also inform the hero of the forthcoming competition and force him to participate.

The *mergen*<sup>8</sup> hurried to pierce the window with his knife and looked. Oh! Oh! Oh! *Sazhen*<sup>9</sup> wide and *sazhen* height an old man! He is coming from the beach [to home], and his legs are stuck in the ground knee-deep. "What an old man he is!" When I walked, I did not step like him, but he is walking – *chamoliak* [with such a sound] – sticking in the ground [...]. "Where are you going that you have dropped to my place?" "Where am I going? Where am I travelling? Downstream from this place, there is a big village, and there will be a contest there. I am going to those games. Going there, I would like to pick you up. I need to get you as a companion." (Ivan Torokovich)

In his time, Vladimir Propp (2000 [1946]: 277) noticed that it was not the personal abilities of a tale personage, but the capabilities of his spirits-helpers that guarantee victory:

Attentive examination of the tale shows that in the competitions, neither the hero's dexterity, nor his strength is shown, but other qualities. It is the fairy helper who delivers a hero's victory. Without this helper the hero can do nothing; the matter is not about his personal strength.

The presence of such a spirit-helper indicates that the tale narrates not about contests among ordinary people but about shamanic competitions.

Invisible participants play the key role not only in the tale contests, but also in those tradition games that were held in reality. These games were performed as rituals, accompanied with sacrifices.<sup>10</sup> Scholars affirm that not only the Nanai, but also other indigenous Siberian peoples made sacrifices during the traditional games. V. S. Taskin (1973: 404) writes that during sacrifices the Uigur held horse riding events. Radzhana Dashinimayevna Dugarova (2004) reports about the coincidence of sporting games and sacrifices among the Buriat, and emphasises that the Buriat considered that the competition itself was thought of as "a bloodless sacrifice to the deities". The Nanai held the games-sacrifices during the ice drifting time because it is the time when the snow melts, and "the ground is changing its colour from white to black" and when "shamanic spirits together with their armed troops of the subservient spirits" become active (Gara Kisovna). It is significant that the name of one of the places where Nanai gathered to compete in "playing with a big stone" (i.e. in raising it), was called *Seven* (literally, 'spirit').

Even if the competitors were not shamans but ordinary people, the benevolence of the spirits towards them was a decisive requirement not only of winning, but also of divining the future. Divination rather than material reward for winning (the winners were not supposed to receive anything) represented the main interest of the competitors both among the Nanai and among the other indigenous peoples of Siberia. Thus, mentioning the eating competitions ("peculiar rituals") in the Yakut ritual *Ysyah*, Ekaterina Romanova (1997: 192) affirms that the competitors were convinced that their destiny "is encoded in the ritual food: more the eater drank and ate more happiness he or she earned for the next year". Interpretation of games as rituals, that can influence the

future of the participants also belong to Roberta Hamayon (2012: 5): “playing is experienced as testing one’s luck or capacity for luck in the future, and believing in this test is held to help one jump at opportunities”.

The dependence of games on the invisible participants-spirits is even more obvious in the case of competitor-shamans. Unfortunately, I could not find out if the Nanai ever held public shamanic games in front of an audience and supporters.<sup>11</sup> However, in literature, there are some references to such games among the other indigenous peoples of Siberia. Thus, Waldemar Jochelson (1926: 127) reports that Yukagir shamans publicly demonstrated their abilities during inter-clan competitions. As Galina Nikolayevna Gracheva (1983) elucidates, shamans fought physically, when they did not rely only for help of their spirits-servants. Writing about Nganasan shamans Gracheva (*ibid.*: 127) writes, “stripped naked, shamans fought on the tops of high hills at night”. Georg F. Heyne (1999: 387) reports about the comparable ritual battles between the Evenki shamans.

Apart from their physical strength, shamans also used the power of their spirits during these struggles. Thus, A. K. D’yachkov (2006: 183) writes that the Chuvan shaman has a

so called evil stone, which is used for shooting at rival shaman [...]. Sometimes, two shamans play using evil power, they shoot at each other with those stones, and when one of them succeeded in hitting his enemy, that enemy falls flat on his back and lies lifeless for several hours. Then he returns to life and for his turn also shoots at the opponent, who also falls the same way and then revives.

Such spiritual contests can sometimes be only partly available for detached onlookers. Some shamans confirmed to me that watching such contests they could see only one of two shamans because the other was hidden in the spiritual space. Chapaka Danilovna assured me that she saw such a fight with her own eyes: “He [a shaman] was alone in the field, but he could also [spiritually] see his rival there. He was fighting with that adversary, rolling on the ground. We did not see that rival, but he did.” Sometimes, as shamanists believe, competing shamans can be observed in the form of fighting animals, which are actually nothing other than the visible forms of the shamans’ spirits. During the fight between their spirits-helpers, shamans might stay far away from each other (for example, in different villages) and sleep or hoe their garden. Scholars have recorded some data on similar views of shamanic duels among other indigenous peoples of Siberia. Thus, Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff (1999: 371) mentions two Evenki shamans who turned into a tiger and a bear and fought in people’s presence while physically they were divided each from the other by a huge distance. According to Ivan Aleksandrovich Khudyakov (2002: 142), hostile Yakut shamans “walk around just like ordinary people, but at that very time their animals [spirits-helpers] are fighting somewhere. The ordinary people certainly do not see it, but the shamans do.”

In other cases, shamanic competition is entirely sunk in the spiritual world and does not become apparent outwardly. Nanai shamans told me that they prefer to fight imperceptibly for those around them. “Neither you, nor I can learn how shamans fight to each other, how they quarrel; they do their part quietly to hide it from everyone” (Niura Sergeevna), so, “in presence of other people, they were quiet; they did not say anything bad” (Olga Egorovna). That feature is not specifically Nanai. Sergei Mikhailovich Shi-

rokogoroff (1999: 371) mentioned similar secret competitions among Evenki shamans, which were entirely hidden in the spiritual realm. According to Shirokogoroff, the contesting shamans could accomplish battles and murders not only during their waking hours: they also compete in the fighting form of competition at night while they are asleep.

#### COMPETITION AS A MEANS OF FRIGHTENING RIVALS

Meanwhile, the public shamanic competition with numerous audience and supporters has its advantage over the secret ones. It solves the important task of bringing pressure on spectators and forming public opinion concerning the power of the contending parties; and, which is especially important, it frightens shamans' potential rivals. In tales, the organiser of the competition calls people to participate in the games because of fear of his personal opponent. Trusting to prevent his possible attack, he tries to frighten the opponent by demonstrating victories over the numerous guests. The initiator of the competition, the flying Yurgi *mergen*, praises himself saying that he is the best among all the people (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 149). Another motivator of the games "throws [her rivals] in such a way that their hips broke. She throws them in such a way that their arms broke." Before the decisive duel, "the fine fellow shouted in such a way that all the *mergen* [the guests who came to participate in the games] fell flat on their backs" (Ivan Torokovich). In the tale recorded by Orest Petrovich Sunik, the agreement of the competition was to raise the heavy stone. As soon as the hero came, the organiser of the competition started vigorously demonstrating his incredible abilities.

Oho, the man is approaching [...], he is holding seven people in one hand and nine people in the other. He has pierced those people all the way through and is approaching and carrying them that way. The audience looks at him, how extraordinary he is; he is wearing a silver skirt and a gold dress. Having approached, he scattered around those people, seven people from one hand and nine people from another one; then he quickly grabbed that huge stone and strongly rose it up. (Sunik 1985: 122)

Demonstrating such unique strength, the master does not leave to the hero any chance of success in demonstrating physical strength, and then the hero changes the conditions of the competition, using shamanic techniques, and wins.

Frightening rivals by demonstrating power is also typical of shamanic praxis. From time to time, shamans fight each other in order to show the power of their spirits (Jochelson 1926: 212) and enter into competition directly using the process of performing their rituals. Nikolai Petrovich told me that he attended the healing ceremony performed by three Nanai shamans. One of them, Pilkha, who was the eldest, sent Molo, the youngest, along the invisible spiritual road to search for a client's soul; secretly "he sent some sort of a dream in front of him". As Molo later explained, it had become very dark before him. Molo was frightened and stopped singing, and Pilkha laughed being satisfied by showing to everyone that he was more powerful shaman than Molo. (Bulgakova 2013) During another shamanic ceremony, when a Nanai shaman was going around the houses of his or her patients, it sometimes happens that in one of the houses he was as if stopped by some odd power. Vera Chubovna says:

Having come into a house, he is shamanising, shamanising, but is not able to leave the place. It means that someone in that house is also a shaman. As I remember, it happened quite often. My grandfather was a shaman. Once a shaman-woman came into his place, she was shamanising, shamanising, but could not leave. Then she said, "so and so", she said to my grandfather, "why do not you let me go out?"

Ivan Torokovich praised himself, saying that when another shaman-woman started shamanising, he was able to learn about it though physically he was far from her. He used this ability to block her shamanic road in the spiritual space, impeding her.

When she is shamanising, I can tease her and play jokes on her, I can block her shamanic road! If she feels it, she would say, "Why are you playing this way? Open my road!" Then I can do it as well [...]. I am such a joker! You must prove either you are a real shaman or not!

As my informants explained, in the spiritual world there is a peculiar podium similar to the one where they reward winners of the sporting competitions.

There is a shamanic tree which all shamans can see when they shamanise. Having assumed the aspect of birds, the shamans perch on the tree's branches to look around at their familiar companions, the other bird-shamans, who are also perched on the same tree. On that tree, the shamans can find out who of them are currently stronger or weaker. The weaker shamans alight in the lower branches of the tree, but the more powerful ones are able to reach the higher branches [...]. Some of the successful shamans, who perched on the higher branches, are not able to resist the temptation to express their scorn regarding the shamans who have perched lower. Ivan Torokovich condemned one shaman-woman: "She told us that she perched high and that from her high branch, she dropped her excrement onto those who were lower [...]. She considers herself to be better and higher than the other shamans, because she could alight higher, and not lower. She explained it to us that way. She perches there and drops her excrements onto the rest of the shamans!" (Bulgakova 2013)

One of the typical ways in which shamans use not only demonstrate their strength, but also create a special impression upon those around them, is, on the contrary, firstly to imitate pretended weakness and feebleness. Shaman Olga Egorovna said that shamans are "artful and you will never guess who exactly is the most powerful among them". When shaman meets his or her colleague (also in the spiritual world), he can pretend to be very weak, "he drags himself along like a decrepit dog", to provoke his rival into the wrong actions. Pretending to be weak gives shaman possibility to win over the opponent with much bigger effect.

Well, how cunning he was! I was a fool, I saw that he was weak and what I did? Had I trodden on him or what? Had I hit him? Only later, he has shown his real power [...]. However, I, a fool, thought: "I am a hero! Let me crush him!"

The tale hero acts in a similar way. Before a competition he pretends to be weak and worthy of contempt. The hero of Ivan Torokovich's tale having come to the games takes a place near the women, which for a man is considered very shameful. In the tale, recorded by O. P. Sunik (1985: 113), before the hero entered the competition, he "blew,

and turned into an unhappy one, he became bold, all over covered with pus, such very bad one; he became a very dirty one". The weaker those heroes seem before the games, the bigger is the effect of their subsequent victory.

#### PAYMENT FOR DEFEAT

Not only is disinformation concerning the capacities of the hero in tale typical, but the tale also hides the main reasons forcing the personages to participate in competition. There is a striking inconsistency between what the tale reports concerning the personages' motivations for going to the place of competition, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what tale says about the results of the competition. The invitation to participate in the games looks like a harmless boast of superiority, a wish just to play and measure swords: "Well, let us try our prentice hand!" (Sunik 1958: 114) "It would be good to find a strong person to compete with!" (Avrorin 1986: 138) The forthcoming winner leaves for a journey to the game place without any serious motivation. He just joins other people: "there was a boat moving upstream", all people go; they say there will be a competition. One of them said to the master: "I would like to ask your son to be my friend" and to go to the competition as well. (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 63) However, the result of loss in games is so significant that it influences the freedom and even life of all the numerous losers. The organiser of the competition (the winner) takes all the losers as his servants and makes them to leave for their villages in order to bring to and to set in the winner's place all his fellow villagers (congeners). The Nanai elders affirm that gathering people under the winner's authority previously took place among the Nanai in reality.

That one who is stronger, can remain alive. That one, who is weaker, must die. If someone has won, he takes to his place all the people from the village of the loser. He has all of them in tow. It was so in reality [...]. If it was not so in reality, there would certainly not be such tales. (Ivan Torokovich)

The winner of tale games not only submits people, who for some reason agreed with no complaint. He also often kills the losers, who do not even try to resist.

In Alexey Kisovich's tale, a beauty (the elder sister) who has just come out on top over two men, plucked at those two mens' hair and dragged them towards her house because they could not outrun her while she was skiing. "Look, dear!" She said to her youngest sister. "I have caught them by their heads and was carrying them when their heads tore from their bodies! It is a bad job! What to do?" "Okay", the elder sister said. She tied the heads and put them on the threshold: one inside and the other outside. "Let everybody know what I have done!" (Bulgakova 2013)

The hero of one of the tales competes in magic with a girl-shaman. She threw at him in turn a knife and a needle. However, the hero, who had powerful spirits-helpers, managed to evade them and threw them back. The knife and the needle pierced right into the girl's face. Then the girl-shaman clapped her hands, and the hero's dress caught fire. Having managed with fire, the hero in his turn clapped his hands, and then thrust the girl's head into the hole in the pole in the middle of the room.

She had stuck there [...]. The girl was crying; the tears flowed down her cheeks. The fine young man forced her to look at him. She did. Fie-fie [he blew] and clapped his hands. The girl easily pulled out her head, but her legs themselves rose and stuck to the ceiling; her head was hanging down. Then he said: "Girl, you wanted to kill me, but now you will dry out like a dried pike, you will dry out like a dried carp," he said it and went out. (Sunik 1985: 123–124)

Nanai shamanists told me that not only in the tales, but also in reality did shamanic competitions result in death of a loser. If the rivals-shamans were physically far from each other, and they both just dreamt their duel, people could not watch the duel itself, but could physically observe the death of the loser. For instance, the shaman-loser unexpectedly fell down "as if someone had shot at him from a gun" for no any visible reasons, or his body suddenly became "all over covered with wounds as though someone invisible had beaten him, and then he died" (Chapaka Danilovna). Some information about similar shamanic encounters was also recorded among the other Siberian indigenous peoples. Thus, V. L. Seroshevskiy (2011: 267) wrote that being in competition, Yakut athlete-shamans, or to say more exactly, their spirits-helpers

can grapple with each other and lie this way for several months or even years, being unable to conquer one another. Then the people who are the owners of those spirits [...] become heavily sick, until one of them would die and free his rival.

The shamanic ability to kill people distantly was used in military practice. Thus, Dolgan shamans together with military men (*кочуун*) participated in competitions of "bloody nature, they shot at each other using arrows with iron points" (Popov 1934: 119). The competitions, in which shamans participated and which led to the deaths of the losers, were part of common warfare; and, vice versa, warfare was often conducted in the form of competition. However, what distinguished competition from warfare was the certain regalement (announcement of place and time of meeting, fixing the tasks the participants should accomplish, etc.). This contrasts to factual absence of rules in the course of military conflict: attack without warning was typical, but at the same time this is also similar to shamanic spiritual competition: shamans also rushed to attack their rivals without notification.

#### WHY DOES THE LOSER NOT TRY TO AVOID CAPTIVITY AND DEATH?

There are some tales in which the killing of the losers is delayed, and in which the losers' strange submission and lack of any attempt to avoid death is especially obvious. In the Nanai tale *Yurgi mergen*, early in the morning the hero competes with Yurgi mergen skiing and hunting an elk (see Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 151–153): "Over there in the forest, there is an elk. Let us go and catching it. Let us compete to see who will be the first to catch it and kill it." Only after the competition is over and the participants have returned and finished their dinner "in the middle of the night" does Yurgi mergen speak to the hero, who has won the victory, begging: "My friend, do not kill me, have pity!" Nevertheless, the hero grasps Yurgi mergen's hair and takes him outside. He

tosses Yurgi mergen about, flinging him against a rock and tearing him into three parts.

The only attempt the loser makes to resist death is his lamentable and usually unsuccessful begging for mercy and suggestion that he be taken as a slave instead. "Eh, I only worry about my life. Will I not be able to fetch water, to chop firewood? Will I not be able to dust the floor?" (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 31–33) In another tale, the people, who have already taken part in the competition instruct the novices this way: "If you tell her [the organiser of the competition] not to kill you, she will not kill you" (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 67).

If you tell her "I am not able to win, I am going to become nothing", she will at once agree and will not kill you. However if you say: "I am not going to become your slave", she will swallow you right away. (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 69)

To exchange loss of life for loss of freedom is the best that the losers can hope for: not one of them even tries to avoid punishment as such, and as the winner can even leave them for a while with no control; their obedience seems to be strange. Only in one tale known to me does the winner, a little boy, order the loser, an old man, to bring him all his fellow villagers, and after that he cuts the old man's nose and ears: "Wherever you go, I will find and recognise you by those cuts!" (Sunik 1958: 114) In other similar episodes, the losers voluntarily and with no control leave for their villages and readily bring their fellow villagers to the winner.

The obedience of the losers shows that victory in competition results in something important, guaranteeing the fulfilment of the winner's wishes and making any further control over the loser pointless. Tale passes over this in silence, but examining it in the context of shamanic praxis we can notice that the result of shamanic games is resolved long before they start. It is resolved at the moment when the forthcoming winner provides himself with a proper spirit-helper, which gives him potential, or when that upcoming winner influences the spirit of his rival, depriving him from his spiritual support. For example, in the same tale, *Yurgi mergen*, the night before the competition the hero puts a glass of vodka on the sleeping chest of Yurgi mergen. This way he lured a small rat (Yurgi mergen's spirit-helper) out of his nose and killed it.

The rat approached the glass of vodka and [our] fine fellow grabbed it [...]. He had grabbed and crushed, killed it. In the morning, when the rivals started competing, Yurgi mergen said, "My friend, I don't feel well" [...]. He could not ski, his skis knocked *kutek-kutek* [with such a sound] [...]. It was over. He could not do anything. He became like that. (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 149–151)

Some of my informants confirmed that the shaman-enemies used their souls to manipulate the situation in a similar way, and they know how a person feels in such a case: "They took my soul away. I was at school and suddenly I got terribly sick. It happened in a flash. I was feeble; they took me to the hospital in an ambulance." (Zinaida Nikolaevna)<sup>12</sup>

Victory in competition gives the winner authority over losers' souls and the possibility to subjugate them on the spiritual level. Sergey Nikolayevich Stebnitskiy (2000) wrote that the Koryak shaman-winners "took away strength" from shaman-losers. Shamans gathered in one dugout, or *yaranga*, ate fly agaric mushrooms, and after becoming intoxicated, they "measured their swords". "The more powerful shamans took away power from the weaker shamans. This way they killed their rivals and became stronger;

they live as much longer and have as much strength and life *вюнатгырн'ын* ('life', 'existing', 'law') as had those who die." (Ibid.: 200) This probably relates to sacrificing the loser, who was offered to the spirit-helpers of the winner. If it is so, the physical death of the loser could be delayed, although it remains unavoidable. According to Matvey Nikolayevich Khangalov's (2004: 98) data, the Buryat winners of the games sacrificed beaten rivals to the spirits. The Siberian indigenous peoples performed not only bloody, but also bloodless, animal sacrifices. They dedicated animals to spirits who kept them alive.<sup>13</sup> It is possible to assume that earlier shaman-winners would also dedicate (submit) the losers' souls to their personal shamanic spirit-helpers. This could be done either by means of blood sacrifice of the losers (as in the case mentioned by M. N. Khangalov), or by means of dedicating the losers to spirits without killing them (bloodless sacrifice). This type is indeed the sacrifice that made the living loser dependent and submissive.

#### THE INTEREST OF THE MASTER OF COMPETITION: WAITING TO BE DEFEATED

It would be possible to suppose that the master (organiser) of the tale competition, who sits in the middle of the heaps of human bones, is just interested in enslaving and killing as many people as possible. Nevertheless, from some tales one can clearly see that killing people is merely a side effect of the event. The master of the competition him- or herself suffers from being invincible and paradoxically and strangely enough he or she is fixed upon the wish to be at last defeated. In one of the tales, after all the competitive guests were beaten, people began to look for others who would agree to fight against their shaman.

The shaman's daughter was in tears: "Instead of these men [who lost the game], will you, please, come up! If there is not such a man found, *my father will die because there is no one who can win the fight against him* [emphasis added]." (Sunik 1958: 115)

In the tale *The son of a horse*, a woman, who competes with the numerous guests, is in trouble: she is possessed by an evil spirit, and between the duels, they keep her

nine times nine tied in an iron cage. The hero, who finally managed to beat her, threw her that way that the iron floor burst. [From the crack] with sound *kingiar* there appeared an old woman. "Oh, that child has rescued me!" (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 69)

Beating the possessed woman in fact turns into healing her by freeing her from a malevolent spirit. Thus, holding games is a means to attract many people and to find among them the right person to exorcise the malevolent spirit and to solve the problem of the organiser of the games.

Another problem that the competition organiser would try to solve is his need for a shaman-ally who would help him against his enemy, whom he fights in his dreams.<sup>14</sup> Nanai shamans confess that they never voluntarily agree to help other shamans in the struggle against their enemies, because otherwise those enemies would take revenge on them and against their descendants for a number of generations.

Even the powerful shaman would never undertake it. Even the powerful one would not touch it, because otherwise he himself would get an enemy. He must not! If he interfered, the enemy would learn everything about it. A shaman fights against other shamans, and one of them dies, but no one from the outside would agree to help. Nobody would meddle in it. Nobody would touch it. Nobody would wish to get some additional adversaries. (Chapaka Danilovna)

Nevertheless, the shaman in danger has the means not only to find the proper person, but also to force that person to agree to fight against his or her enemy. This means is competition, which will gather many people (shamans), including the required powerful shaman. If, in a tale, a loser is inferior to a winner in power just a little, the winner can make him become his ally and name him "my younger brother". Such is the plot of Ivan Torokovich's tale *Kopiaru*.

In the other tales, the competition organiser searches for a shaman, a potential supporter, and bribes him by giving him his daughter with no dowry (see Bulgakova 2013). In this case, he would search for a person who is more powerful than he is and who would be able to beat him (and correspondently later to beat his enemy). In other words, he would aim not to win but to be defeated because this defeat would give him a chance to overcome his much more important troubles. However, it is risky and the more powerful hero-guest does not agree in all tales. In some of them, he kills the father (the organiser of the competition) and marries the daughter, or instead of getting married, prefers to kill both the father and his daughter.

#### COMPETITION AS A MEANS OF MEETING AND KILLING AN ENEMY MET IN DREAMS

Other than organising a competition, a person can search for a proper healer or for an ally; he can also look for an enemy, that is for a hostile shaman whom he or she wants to liquidate. My informants are convinced that all shamans have enemies with whom they fight in their dreams, although the shamans usually do not confess that they are fighting. It is only by observing them and by seeing the effects of their fighting can one arrive at this conclusion (Shirokogoroff 1935: 372). Fighting mainly takes place in the spirit world. Because, as in a night dream, "everything is seen indistinct, and it is possible to mix up an enemy with someone else", shamans can be interested in clearly identifying the person who threatens them in the spiritual world, and in meeting that person in the waking hours. A public competition that attracts many participants can help in reaching that goal, but the shaman does not achieve this in every tale. In some texts, on the contrary, he comes off second best, and the advantage falls to his rival. In his turn, the rival also sets analogical secret tasks to solve by means of games.

In the *Yurgi mergen* story the hero suggests to Yurgi mergen that they compete in skiing because he supposes that Yurgi mergen is the person who by a miracle has emptied all his barns and deprived him of property. After the hero killed an elk (the hypostasis of Yurgi mergen) in competition, he was able to regain his property. The plots of Nanai tales are deeply intertwined with shamanic memories of their personal spiritual experiences. The storyteller and shaman Olga Egorovna, who narrated *Yurgi mergen* to me affirmed that she was acquainted with a Nanai shaman-woman who was able to turn

into an elk just like Yurgi mergen. That woman died because an alien shaman started contesting with her in skiing and exactly as in the tale. During the games, he saw an elk (the shaman-woman's spirit-helper) and hit it hard with his ski stick. After returning to the village, he saw that "the shaman-woman was sitting at home and groaning. He actually hit [not the elk, but] her, and she died because of that [...]. It was in reality." To the question of why the shaman commenced a competition with that woman, Olga Egorovna answered that the woman was his enemy, and by means of competition he picked an occasion to beat her. She constantly "took away [the souls-shadows of] his children. A child falls sick and dies, another falls sick and dies." Therefore, he "rejoiced at her death."

#### IS IT POSSIBLE TO REFUSE TO PARTICIPATE IN COMPETITION?

The heaps of human bones around the tale competition organiser, or the number of previous unlucky participants who had to settle around his dwelling, clearly shows that the guest's chance of victory is extremely small. Why then does no one who has just heard about the competition try to escape participating in such a risky action? The storytellers explain their readiness to participate by the fact that the person who calls them to compete is always a shaman. In reality, in any life circumstances, people try not to contradict shamans in anything, because it could be unsafe. Everyone tries to please a shaman, to play up to and wait upon him or her "because of the mystical fear in front of shaman's scary strength and power" (Lopatin 2011: 253). The call to register at the place of competition is itself a shaman's attack, and as competitions are mainly held on the spiritual level, neglecting that call does not defend anybody from a spiritual duel with that shaman. The invitation itself is the beginning of the fight. The person challenged to compete with a shaman is under attack from the very moment of the challenge and has no chance to escape the duel. "If someone is attacking and does not answer, he will be killed, he will die" (Ivan Torokovich).

#### CONCLUSION: COMPETITION AS A PARTICULAR CASE OF THE INTER-SHAMANIC CONTEST

As with all other tales, the Nanai shamanic tale is based on the dynamic collision of personages, their conflicts, controversy and confrontation, as well as the inherent incompatibility between the personages. The tale competition is just one of the manifestations of such general competitiveness. In addition, the Nanai shamanic tale is a result of shamanic praxis, for which competition is extremely significant. The very relationship between shamans and their spirits-helpers is antagonistic. The first contact with the spirits comes at the stage of mastering them and becoming a shaman is in some way a manifestation of this possession (The Nanai call this condition *goria*, 'madness'). Spirits torment a shaman-to-be, and he or she fights against them trying either to escape from them (that is to recover) or to triumph over them (to subdue them temporarily and to become a shaman).<sup>15</sup> In some tales exactly such a struggle between a shaman (the hero) and his spirits is presented in the form of this competition. In the tale recorded

by Sunik (1958: 137), the golden hare (the potential hero's spirit-helper) challenges the hero: "Let us compete. I will run round that tree nine times; if you do not catch me, you will go mad." In addition, the inclination to conflict and tension is also typical to relationships between shamans. Conflict lays the very foundation of their relationship, both between themselves and with the spirit world. On the one hand, one spirit-helper can serve only one person,<sup>16</sup> and on the other hand, shamans constantly try to increase their opportunities and power by means of collecting new spirits. As a result, shamans are permanently tempted to increase their supremacy by struggling against other shamans and seizing spirits from each other. Another objective circumstance that creates tension between shamans is situated in the very principles of their healing praxis. Shamans are convinced that alien spirits-helpers can be unsafe and dangerous for them. However, as shamans have to heal alien people, they constantly have to intrude into the sphere that is engaged by alien spirits and controlled by foreign shamans. This course is fraught with forced inter-shaman tension and serious conflicts. One of my informants defined shamanic activity as "permanent competition".

All contests in Nanai shamanic tales are connected with the fact that tale contest is one of the manifestations of the savage confrontation between shamans that happens on the spiritual level and that are hidden from outside observers. On that same spiritual level the winner oppresses the loser not physically, but spiritually. Correspondingly, the Nanai tale shows that power in the physical world is obtained not as a result of the personal qualities of the participants, but as a consequence of having 'better and more powerful' spirits: the real competition is performed in the Nanai tale not between people, but between their spirits-helpers.

#### NOTES

1 Traditional shamanic praxis was still active in the 1980s and up to the mid 1990s, during the initial stage of my field research; from the 2000s it was replaced by neo-shamanic praxis, which is no longer connected to the tradition of storytelling. The field material for my research was collected during almost-yearly field seasons between 1980 and 2014 in the Nanai villages, Khabarovsk Krai, Russia. It was audio-recorded from the different shamans and shamanists not only in Russian, but also in the Nanai language with follow-up transcription and translation.

2 For more detail concerning creating of tales in the context of shamanic praxis, see Bulgakova 2011 and 2013.

3 The information recorded during such interviews can be divided into two parts. It is personal shamans' memorates or, another way, their *primary utterances*, their revelations concerning past and present personal experience and shamanists' *secondary utterances*, i.e., the retelling of events happened to another person, in case if that informant was received from that person directly. Shamans' revelations about their spiritual experience often contain information that seems to be abnormal and improbable. In some details (though it happens rarely), it even surprisingly resembles some tale motifs. It makes it necessary to call to mind distinction between memorates (personal information) and fabulates (folkloric narratives). First, they differ by the form of their existing. Among the shamanists, discussing shamans' personal affairs is usually limited by the circle of very few initiated ones, if is ever discussed at all, whereas fabulates freely pass from one person to another like any other folklore texts. Secondly, difference concerns the content. Shamanic tales narrate about anonymous personages, who act in uncertain time in indeterminate place, but memorates give exact information about names, time and places. Improb-

ability of some shamans' utterances can be explained by the fact that during their praxis they deal with "an undercover layer, which is usually hidden from the eyes of a detached onlooker" (Funk and Kharitonova 2012: 122). However, for our purposes, it is enough to know that the shamans themselves consider it to be trustworthy and, whenever it is possible, to constrain from any correlations and ill-wresting interpretations. A researcher should not mix the notions of trustworthiness of the story and of its reality. What seem to be stories, which are invented and have nothing to do with real world, can be accepted as real stories for the bearers of shamanic tradition.

4 Starting from approximately 1930s, when the Soviet rule was establishing, similar practices, like all other populous rituals, were prohibited and replaced by so called Soviet feasts. Concerning the regular, non-shamanic competitions wrote Bel'dy (1989), Prokopenko (2003).

5 The idea of the spiritual territories, expressed by shamans, is close to the interpretation of shamanic space uttered by Vladimir Bogoraz (1923, cited by Znamenski 2007: 115): shamanic space is "an additional measure of the physical world". Tatiana Bulgakova (2014) also wrote about the Nanai shamans' conception of the spiritual territories.

6 For more details see Bulgakova 2013.

7 This fact makes us doubt that the Nanai shamanic tale belongs to fairytales. Taking into account its heroic nature, Yuriy Sem (1986) called it a heroic tale.

8 *Mergen* means in Nanai 'fine fellow, the hero of tales'.

9 *Sazhen* is an unit of measurement = 2.1336 meters (7 feet).

10 This important fact is mentioned in tales: "They brought a big pig, the pig that was laid up for the [sacrifice in] competition" (Sunik 1985: 111).

11 At that time, when I had the possibility to collect material among the Nanai, they preferred to compete secretly exclusively "in the spiritual territories". It was not possible for ordinary people to observe such competitions.

12 Manipulations with spirits and souls of the rivals on the eve of games is only one side of shamanic reality, rich by competitiveness.

"Shamans fight in dreams. When an alien shaman beats the *sewen* (spirit) of our shaman [...], when he strongly drives it into a stone [...], our shaman is not able to shamanize any more. For him, it only remains to die [...], but we cannot notice it [...]. In the morning they find him already dead." (Ivan Torokovich)

In other words, if a participant of shamanic competition manages to 'kill' the spirit of his rival, the loser becomes dependent on the winner's spirit, and since then, he would not be able to resist. The similar situation is typical for shamanic tale. In some of them, during the duel between the hero and his rival, the hero can win only because his spirits bring to him *ergen* the creature, in which the rival's soul-life is placed. In the tale *Khalaton mokhan* old man, *ergen* hero's rival, is placed in the half-baked nestling. The hero's spirits-birds bring that nestling to the hero, when he was fighting against that old man.

Then the hero pulls out the nestling's wings, and the old man's arms broke off. He tore nestling's legs, and old man's legs broke off. Eh, all his arms and legs were over there. "Eh, dear, now you will see your back made by your father." He turned his head face toward his back. Eh, after that the old man began to cry: "Look here, dear, though I killed your father, but I did not torment him that way, when I was killing him," he said [...]. Eh, fine fellow killed him after he tormented him that way. (Bel'dy and Bulgakova 2012: 63)

13 Leonid Vasil'yevich Kostikov (1930) wrote about bloodless sacrifice of reindeer among the Nenets.

14 Scholars repeatedly mentioned that shamans sometimes form coalitions to fight against alien shamans.

Master and novice enter into a spiritual and social alliance, which implies that both partners have to defend each other against hostile shamans and other adversaries (Mader and Gippelhauser 2000: 84). Not infrequently two or three shamans join their power to destroy a fourth (Tret'yakov 1869: 426).

15 If you start shamanising before you defeat the spirits in your dreams (your future helpers), you will just die and that is it! Those people who have not won in their dreams and simply shout in vain, do not recover after they become shamans. However many times they shamanise, they never get better. (Shaman Lingdze)

16 Collective possession of such a spirit manifests only between the generations, meaning that spirits can be inherited.

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