



## Shamanism, Occult Murder, and Political Assassination in Siberia and Beyond

A Tyvan Shaman, Siberia.  
PC: Ninara.

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*This essay examines the revival of shamanism in a Siberian city and analyses the political dimensions of rituals for reversing the effects of sorcery assault. Drawing on fieldwork exploring an epidemic of occult violence in Kyzyl, Tyva Republic, the essay identifies a new type of shamanic detective and entrepreneur, whose techniques of counter-cursing cut across the state's operations of security and justice.*

As it is well known, shamans are associated with prescient or anticipatory knowledge about unpleasant occurrences, as well as with personal 'abilities' in divining and detecting hidden aspects of significant events. In making a diagnosis about an illness or a misfortune, shamans often perform rituals for reversing negative effects attributed to witchcraft and occult malignity. In this essay, I will revisit my

fieldwork with shamans in the Siberian city of Kyzyl, the capital of the Russian Republic of Tyva, offering some insights into an epidemic of curses and sorcery as an expression of a universal, and currently prevalent, phenomenon—namely collective hopelessness and the fear of impending doom.

To begin, I shall present an example of a shaman's (after-the-fact) divination about 9/11. This shaman, a specialist himself in counter-cursing, was a key informant on the subject of 'curses' (*kargysh* in Tyvan) during my fieldwork in a religious organisation in Kyzyl in 2003. In one of our conversations, he offered the following testimony about the course of events leading to 9/11:

Did you watch these two airplanes, which the (suicide) terrorists hijacked in order to strike the Towers in New York? This was a curse affliction too. Several years earlier, when the United States had invaded Iraq, a Muslim priest cursed the US President from his mosque in Baghdad. The priest's curses were revealed in *this* form, in retaliation for this invasion.

This provocative statement by a native leader of shamanic (religious) revival in Kyzyl illustrates an intriguing aspect of remedies for illnesses in an 'Association of Shamans' that runs a clinic in Kyzyl. The shamans of this clinic attributed their clients' problems to curses that had been cast against them by various enemies due to envy or unjustifiable hostility. This (perceived) proliferation of curses marked a striking reversal of earlier accounts by classical Tyvan ethnographers, whose books include stories of people encountering spirits or falling ill after walking through dangerous locales in the wilderness. In contrast to these accounts, which involve religious offences and violations as a cause of illness, the materials of the present study document the proliferation of a new sort of curse paranoia.

And this is not the only difference with past traditional explanations for misfortune. Consultations about how to deal with curse

afflictions were sought after by individuals who attempted to solve tensions and conflicts associated with the legal system. In this context, rituals of healing and retaliation—the focus of this essay—address complex synergies of real and occult violence, which are ungovernable by the Russian law. I argue that procedures of divination and counter-cursing can be analysed as a grassroots operation of cultural (or shamanic) justice, which is co-extensive with the state's institutions. In other words, the strand of shamanic retaliation that this essay documents functions as a rational alternative to the expression of motives channelled through overt violence and murder in this specific society of south Siberia.

## **The Soviet Cultural Revolution in Tyva**

The ethnographic data of this study were collected over the course of fieldwork in one of the four religious organisations for the revival of shamanism that functioned in Kyzyl during the time of my fieldwork. A region in south Siberia approximately the size of Greece and bordering Mongolia, Tyva is the home of ancient traditions of nomadic pastoralism and horse-breeding (Soyan-Peemot 2020; Vainshtein 2009). Following the establishment of the Autonomous Republic of Tyva in 1990, it has also become the site of a renewal of local religions. While for more than two decades (1921–44) the polity known as the People's Republic of Tannu-Tyva was part of the United Nations as a nominally independent state (although in essence it was under Soviet rule), in 1944 this territory was formally annexed by the Soviet Union.

As Galina Lindquist (2011, 72) has shown in her works on the history of religions in Tyva, in the first years of the Stalinist administration in this territory during the 1920s the Soviets relied on the literate Buddhist clergy for the establishment of an independent state. Nonetheless, as happened throughout



Siberia in the 1930s, religious devotees and practitioners (denigrated as ‘cult officials’ in the Soviet parlance) were relentlessly repressed by a Tyvan state elite, which represented one of the fiercest Bolshevik regimes of Asia and the Far East (Lindquist 2011, 72–73; for an eyewitness account see Mänchen-Helfen 1931). While the practitioners became extinct by the 1960s due to the anti-religious mobilisations and expanding medical facilities and boarding schools, some rituals survived in clandestine forms among isolated and remote herder camps (*aaldar* in Tyvan).

In his magisterial 2007 book *The Beauty of the Primitive*, Andrei Znamenski notes a fascinating and rather undocumented aspect of pan-Siberian adventures of religious survival throughout the Soviet ‘Cultural Revolution’. As he writes, within this intolerable socio-intellectual atmosphere, dominated by zealots of Stalinist modernisation and their enthusiasm for eradicating shamanism, the indigenous nations of Siberia reinvented their sacred customs in forms almost unnoticeable by outsiders. While shamanic drums and attire were being confiscated or even placed in museum collections for Russia’s ‘nationalities’, the natives in the Altai, Tyva, and Evenkiya practised ritual healing with tools that occupied ancillary functions in the original shamanic rituals, such as branches, bows, and arrows. My informants recalled another ingenuous

A private collection of drums: The figure in the cross-pieces of the brown drum represents god Mars. This drum is used for counter-cursing rival shamans. The ‘white’ (ak in Tyvan) drum on the left is used in healing rituals. PC: Kostantinos Zorbas.

practice that substituted for shamanic drums, namely, the ringing of tiny bells, a technique which at that time was politically less dangerous than trance rituals that involved an audience (Shirokogoroff 1935). Remarkably, indigenous inventiveness encompassed also ‘imaginary drums’, i.e. drawings of drums on various materials for ritual use, as well as the custom of waving white fabrics next to a ‘sacred tree’ (*tel’yash* in Tyvan) in order to summon the spirits of a locality and ward off the spirits of illnesses (Znamenski 2007, 342–43).

## Shamanism and Ethnic Integration

Soviet socialist scholarship and its ‘struggle’ (*bor’ba* in Russian) against the ‘fraudulent and exploitative’ religious faith of shamans provide a crucial background to the present analysis of shamanic assassins operating on the margins of the law and the state in the town of Kyzyl. Kyzyl—a Tyvan word that means ‘red’ and stands as a signifier of Soviet enlightenment

and progress—is a town of approximately 110,000 residents in the geographical centre of the Tyva Republic. Throughout the 1990s, it was known as one of the poorest and most crime-ridden provincial towns of post-socialist Russia.

In a way evocative of Morten Pedersen's 2011 study of Darhad shamanism as an 'ontology of transition', which emerged in north Mongolia after the meltdown of socialist institutions, the first official guilds (or societies) of 'shamans' (*shamany* in Russian; *khamnar* in Tyvan) in the 1990s addressed the consequences of the socioeconomic disintegration of the Soviet polity (Zorbas 2015). In her pioneering work on shamanic and Buddhist revitalisation in Tyva, Galina Lindquist (2011) examines whether *this* organisational form of state-sponsored shamanic activities was antecedent to the 'juridical confessionalisation' of shamanism as a religion on a par with Buddhism and Russian Orthodoxy. Interestingly, she argues that the official restoration of shamanism as a 'traditional confession' in the Autonomous Republic of Tyva derived from scholarly theories of shamanism as the Ur (Paleolithic) religion (Lindquist 2011, 76; Vitebsky 1995).

Nonetheless, while this image of shamanism as an indigenous tradition has sustained Tyvan ethnonationalism—even including assertions of separatism and rejection of any ties with Moscow in the early 1990s—it is, rather, Buddhism, as a national religion, represented by the local *sangha* (monastic order), that unites the Tyvan nation with a (Buddhist) transnational 'ecumene' whose centre is in Tibet (Lindquist 2011). My research also provides an additional standpoint for challenging some of the above assumptions about shamanism as a key feature of ethnic integration or nationalism in Tyva. It does so by highlighting how some kinds of shamanic redress are isomorphic with (or relevant for) methods in organised crime and political assassination.

A brief theoretical extension in support of this argument is necessary. In his classic 2001 study *Stratagems and Spoils*, the anthropologist of South Asia Frederick Bailey argues that

political decision-making acknowledges the tensile co-presence of normative and pragmatic rules; it is the practical wisdom and expediency associated with the latter set of rules are crucial for winning in contests ranging from elections to competing claims in the criminal underworld (2001). For Bailey (1994), the manipulation of normative rules as a means of manning the barricades against opponents underpins every forum for competition: the Parliament, the Cosa Nostra (where 'anarchy' is fenced off by rules or a code of revenge), or an Indian village council launching a witch trial against a wealthy villager.

The relevance of this theory for conceptualising the shifting roles of shamans as the catalysts of 'cultural crimes' and as 'ministers of justice' will emerge in several intriguing cases below. Here, the focus is on a rather similar analysis by political scientist Charles Tilly (1985, 175), who argues that protection rackets 'share a home with their upright cousins in responsible government'. For Tilly, whose theory of war-making and state-formation presents an alternative to Enlightenment ideas of the social contract, governments have organised protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—which is basically the only way they differ from racketeers.

## Shamanic Justice

Let us see how these propositions illuminate some rather undocumented aspects of shamanic practices in Kyzyl. Crucially, the picture of shamanism that emerges from the data on counter-cursing consultations that I collected differs from official (and scholarly) perceptions of an ethnic religion. While my sample of clients includes Russians, Kazakhs, and other Russian-speaking nationals of Central Asian origins who were treated for curse affliction, the majority were ethnic Tyvans.

One case concerned a businessman from Ulanbaatar, who unexpectedly arrived at the Association of Shamans with a swollen face and seeking a meeting with the Headman. The latter was a self-designated ‘Great Shaman’ (*Ulug Kham* in Tyvan), who acquired his abilities after birth sometime in the 1950s, when his shaman-grandmother washed him in a river in a symbolic act of ‘cutting’ the deadly impact of an evil spirit. This Mongolian businessman claimed that he had been terribly beaten by a gang some days after he arrived at Kyzyl. The beating was a warning; they would let him live only if he paid them off. After the client left, the Headman mentioned to me that his knowledge of the landscape in Tyva would assist this client in his escape, but I do not know if this was only an empty boast as I have no further information about the client’s fate. What is significant here is that the client did not seek official intervention, for instance by going to the police or to the Mongolian consulate in Kyzyl. This suggests that trust in agencies of law enforcement has been transferred to the shamanic detective and entrepreneur, who exemplifies an intimate bond between religiosity and rational risk-taking in the privatised economy of Russia, a bond that in Tyva is predominantly expressed in Buddhist acts of merit-making.

The parameter of rational risk is important for making sense of the above transference of trust to supernatural forces. What stories like this one actually reveal is that a similar motive can be channelled by means of two substantively different structures: namely, pragmatic and ‘occult’ agencies for special protection. Undoubtedly, shamanic incantations for spiritual ‘protection’ (*kamgalal* in Tyvan) do not produce the same outcomes expected from security agencies. Nonetheless, shamans may fulfil protective roles that allow the victim to avoid the consequences and unpleasant risks associated with seeking police mediation (for instance, the possibility of being kidnapped for ransom).

The stories that I collected lead to the conclusion that shamanic rituals are a vehicle for the expression of non-traditional motives, which bear some relevance to the operations of justice in Tyva. Consider, for instance, the following case, in which a legal dispute between ex-spouses over the ownership of property brings occult threats to life. The woman, a Russian whose young son had unexpectedly lost his life, had sued her ex-husband for selling a house that they co-owned. During a consultation, the Headman used his 41 stones to divine the cause of her son’s death. According to him, the boy’s vitality had been stolen by a sorcerer who transplanted it to the aging father, so that the latter would be able to take advantage of it to be with his young mistress.

The client herself, who was waiting for three years for a court hearing, was steadfast in her desire to fend off her ex-husband’s sorcery and to punish him in a deserving manner via a shamanic ontology of immediate returns (for a related ethnography of strategies for deflecting curses in a Mongolian context, see Swancutt 2012). The Headman cleansed her from the curses with juniper incense and chanted his ritual invocation (*algys*h in Tyvan) for summoning his assistant spirits in a ‘trance ritual’ (*khamnaashkyn*). During this performance, he beat his drum and swung it around himself like a ‘whirlwind’ (*kazyrgy*) in a movement of sweeping away the enemy’s curses. Here, the Headman’s divination of a murder by means of ‘soul-harvesting’ is in itself a manifestation of a planetary social diagnostics characteristic of post-revolutionary societies. As the Comaroffs (1999) have famously argued, it becomes, one may say, a ‘shamanic mask’, i.e. an impersonation or an echo of a magically killed young man, who resembles the South African social nightmare of ‘ghost [zombie] workers’, abducted by the rich and elderly witches and bereft of both voice and agency (Comaroffs 1999, 289).

This pattern of occult economy, based on notions of illegitimate extraction or exploitation, emerges also in another consultation at the Association of Shamans. This case, which features splenetic feelings of workplace abuse and of abandonment by a partner, involved an ethnic Tyvan woman, who resigned from her post as an accountant after unsuccessfully filing a petition against her employer, a middle-aged Tyvan woman who had allegedly hired magicians to curse her. Yet, the Headman's *khamnaashkyn* revealed several strands of curse affliction—in addition to curses by her employer, this young woman had also been magically assaulted by a female sorcerer of Armenian nationality. This magician had been hired by a Buryat woman resident in Tyva, who hoped to get this client's office job for one of her own relatives. This kind of dynamic, involving occult specialists as paid assassins for rational and pragmatic purposes, can be perceived as a variant form of a logic of retribution that is present in both post-traditional societies (i.e. Tyva) and modern nation-states or global power blocs. I adopt the notion of 'retributive logic' from anthropologist Garry Trompf, who in his 2004 book *Payback* delineates a universal pattern of 'rationally justified recrimination'. As he notes, religious systems have a legal validity of their own, since they explain 'eventualities too personal or profound to be covered by the law' (2004, 3–9). This is also reflected in the cases of shamanic redress against afflictions with sorcery that are documented in this paper.

A final example from the Headman's caseload illustrates the novel appropriations of shamanic power for purposes associated with political offices. Allegedly, the Headman once travelled by helicopter to a local politician's headquarters, where he performed a ritual so the politician could outdo his opponents and secure his victory in the elections. This is one more piece of evidence that shamanism is reconstituted as an autonomous field, whose purposes and specialisms overlap with motives associated with both crime and politics. As in the previous case study, we find in this

shamanic narrative a synergy between occult strands of violence and rational motives related to competitiveness. The data on counter-cursing practices evince a reorientation of modern shamanic practice toward contexts of insecurity, which are the object of state law and governance.

## Shamanic Revivals and State Power

The ethnographic documentation of shamanism as an alternative to physical and pragmatic mechanisms of harming an opponent has important implications for analysing religious revivals in ethnic societies with active strands of occult violence, but also with a background of past (or present) political repression. As we saw, the criminal figure of shamans as hired killers and quasi-entrepreneurs, who work in the margins of the state's surveillance, descends from a dialectic confrontation between Soviet modernisation and native religious legitimacies (the latter ones surviving the persecutions through oftentimes unrecognisable and ingenuous symbolic forms).

The sample of consultations, which involves both occult and physical threats, leads us to another crucial implication about state-sponsored shamanic revival as an expression of ethnic integration and nationalism in post-Soviet Tyva. Although shamanism is a powerful signifier of ethnic identity, the data of this study identify several unofficial strands of the shamanic complex, which overlap with the operations of state protection and justice. In probing cases that involve aspects of occult and physical conflict, the Headman has reinvented his ancestors' ritual acts of defying state power.■

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