



The Professionalization of Revivalist Shamans as Ministers of Justice in Tyva Republic, Siberia

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Abstract. - This paper documents a strand of religious practices concerned with curse afflictions in Tyva Republic, south Siberia. Drawing on consultations dealing with misfortunes the paper probes a field of justice, which is governed by shamans. The analysis focuses on two cases which illuminate the shamans' function as a judiciary against kinds of transgression which are sanctioned by the Russian justice system. The data reveal the rise of curse afflictions as a cause of misfortunes in Tyva. The paper concludes that, in remedying misfortunes attributed to cursing, shamans re-enact memories of their ancestors' resistance against the Soviet regime. [*Russia, Siberia, Tyva, shamanism, injustice, occult affliction, conflict*]

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This article deals with a kind of social conflict in southern Siberia, which is associated with rituals of healing and counter-cursing. The data were obtained during fieldwork about consultations concerned with curse afflictions in an “Association of Shamans” of the capital city of Tyva Republic, Kyzyl. An intriguing aspect of shamanic revival in Tyva, since the early 1990s, has been the emergence of rituals for remedying curse afflictions attributed to one's enemies. In Kyzyl, a town with a population of one hundred thousand residents, shamans are enlisted by clients who intend to retaliate against offenses associated with their enemies. It is argued that shamans constitute

a strand of unofficial justice, concerned with kinds of conflicts, which are also found in courts of law.

The shamans' function as an unofficial agency of justice constitutes a departure from traditional contexts of indigenous rituals among ethnic Tyvan communities until the first decades of the Soviet rule in Tyva. Even before the territory known as Tannu-Tuva (Tyva) became a Russian colony in 1914, the ethnic Tyvans had been subject to the Chinese (Qing) empire since the mid-eighteenth century. The establishment of Tannu-Tyva as an independent socialist state in 1921 led to the repression of shamans and the Buddhist clergy and brought significant disruptions to the nomadic patterns of subsistence in Tyva. Nonetheless, this political transition did not eradicate the religious traditions of nomadic Tyvan communities. An elderly informant, who was a retired physician, relayed to this author her childhood reminiscences of collective rituals in the countryside, which were still being practiced in the 1940s. – four years before Tyva was annexed by the Stalinist regime. In this context, collective rituals, involving offerings to spirits in “sacred” locations, were central to an ancestor-worship, which underpinned the unit's continuity.

The data of this research evince the rise of accusations of curse affliction, along with the concomitant decline in beliefs about spirit affliction. It will emerge that people – both ethnic Tyvans and Russians – draw on beliefs about occult malevolence in order to explain ambiguous aspects of interpersonal conflicts. A point, which is established in

this article, concerns the clients' motives for resorting to shamanic agencies of justice (see also Zorbas 2015). In commissioning this alternative to the official justice system, the clients are motivated by real tensions and disputes, rather than by subjective perceptions of being cursed by an enemy. This finding will lead us to identify an analogy between the shamans' redress and the official agencies of delivering justice.

The materials of this report were collected during fieldwork about ritual healing in an "Association of Shamans" in Kyzyl in the year 2003. Since the early 1990s, when the autonomous Republic of Tyva was established, individuals who claimed a descent from genealogies of shamans started forming professional religious organizations as "venues" for reviving the local ancestral religion (see Lindquist 2011, 2005). The biographies of these revivalist shamans, as well as their healing interactions with their clients, were the focus of this fieldwork. My fieldwork was primarily concerned with the headman of this association, who was the major informant on curse afflictions in Kyzyl. In the process, it became evident that this fieldwork had identified an "unseen" commonwealth of cursed citizens (with different religious and ethnic identities), who shared a basic principle: a faith in the potential for supernatural retribution associated with the shaman's counter-cursing techniques.

The Problem

An intriguing feature of the consultations under consideration is that shamans may be commissioned for problems, which are normally resolved through court redress. This means that justice is pursued through ritual practices, which deliver "punishment" at an ontological level which (to a rationalist observer) would make no sense regarding the client's purpose of sending an offender to jail – or even killing him. In other words, these rituals are sought after by modern urban citizens wanting to achieve kinds of penalty associated with police, courts, and even hired killers. This problem is further confounded, if we acknowledge that the above "conflict of realities" directly concerns the clients who resort to this alternative. The latter ones sit motionless during the ritual, do not partake of the shaman's visions and trance, and are unaware of just how the shaman's ritual acts and language materialize in effects sharply felt by the enemy (in the most optimal scenario of retaliation). It seems as though faith in the shaman's in-

tangible retaliatory power is stronger than the common sense of confidence in the justice system.

This problem can be considered in relation to the following propositions as indexes of the modernization of Tuva, since it was incorporated into the USSR in 1944:

1) Ethnic Tuvans no longer live in tribal compounds fighting against each other for prevalence over lands reserved for hunting and herding; they have rather adapted to the Russian-style of nuclear family and work, living in privatized apartments. Thus, kinds of inter-group hostility due to starvation have faded. Accordingly, shamans have departed from their traditional role as community-protectors: in intercepting their clients' struggles in bureaucracy and courts of law, they constitute a local variant form of modern-day agencies of informal justice in Russia – as, for instance, private security firms hired by banks in order to impose compliance with contracts (see Ledeneva 2006: 177–181).

2) As a result of their exposure to Soviet education and secularization, Tuvans (and Russians) are aware of the substantive differences between court redress, on the one hand, and religious – shamanic or Buddhist – mediation, on the other, as a way to cope with misfortune and injustice. Although these two structures may be combined into a joint strategy of retaliation (as we shall see), people still may suspect that a shaman, as an alternative for seeking justice, has no chances against the relative certainty of penalties imposed by judges or police – and disbelief may occasionally erupt even during the shaman's counter-cursing performance. We might expect that popular commitment to shamanism as an alternative to revenge or homicide should be declining with modernization. Yet the opposite holds true: the once tribal ancestral worship has been converted into a powerful instrument of supernatural retaliation in the social imagination.

3) As mentioned above, "Shamanism" in Tyva has been restored as an official religion which is under constitutional protection. Yet this development alone cannot explain why shamanic ritual has revived through practices designed to give expression to vindictive and retaliatory motives of individuals. In other words, underneath the Republic's nationalistic project of reviving Shamanism as a national, benevolent "white religion" (*ak chayan* in Tuvan), there exists a dark (*kara* in Tuvan) operation of occult crimes and punishment, which is vested in rituals catering to the aggres-

sive impulses of individuals who labor under a sense of injustice.

This discussion of shamanic rituals in terms of motive and intended harm leads us to a problem of equal interest to anthropologists and legal authorities. If cultures like Tuva endow ritual specialists with extra-legal forces of punishment, does this imply that these cultures have meanings of retaliation and justice, which are better served by shamans than by courts of law? Criminologists may object to this comparison between official and religious institutions of delivering justice, arguing that European (or for that matter, Russian) law sanctions as murder only those acts of aggression involving physical means and instruments, not magical ones like sorcery. Indeed, comparison is unsustainable for crimes perpetrated by magic – but only so long as law does not recognize magic as a crime.

Nonetheless, the situation radically changes if we consider cases of resorting to a shaman for disputes involving real objects of tension and individuals as eyewitnesses. Thus, we arrive at an interesting problem: if hostile and retaliatory motives in disputes over ownership of property or in tensions between government clerks are channeled via a supernatural redress instead of – or parallel to – the courts of law, does this suggest that in cultures like Tyva “shamanism” is viewed as an alternative or an equivalent to the justice system? If so, this has serious implications for the study of crime and justice among the Asiatic cultures of Russia, for reasons that will emerge shortly.

Ethnographic Evidence (Based on a Shaman's Caseload)

While “shamanism” is designated as a traditional religion in Tuva, the data of this study will reveal a different picture of this “traditional” custom. The case studies below will indicate the emergence of a new strand of shamanic religion, which is concerned with kinds of transgression and unlawful conduct, which cannot be sufficiently remedied by the official justice system. A crucial reason behind the state's ineffectiveness in dealing with problems as the ones we are concerned with here, is the parameter of “curses” or sorcery as a lethal or harmful technique. The law in Russia does not identify these practices as criminal offenses. Nevertheless, the data below will point to a deeper analogy between the redress associated with religious and state actors, respectively. Namely, individuals may resort to shamanic justice in order to

remedy objective disputes and to make their enemies suffer for their misdeeds. Although some of the shamans' clients may suspect familiar persons of curse affliction, other clients in the sample of consultations reported incidents of real interpersonal conflict as the main reason for enlisting this alternative means of redress.

At this point, a presentation of the sample of consultations for curse affliction is necessary in light of the propositions advanced above. Importantly, these consultations were a fraction of the overall sample of ritual and remedial activities performed by the shamans of this association. The practicing of divination and of ceremonies for seeing off the soul of deceased persons is overwhelming in this sample. These two services were the most frequently sought ones by ethnic Tyvans. Accordingly, the numbers of rituals for cleansing one's own self or one's property from “negative energies” and evil spirits “competed” for prevalence against the numbers for counter-cursing consultations. Approximately sixty rituals for remedying afflictions with “curses” and with spirits, respectively, were practiced by the shamans in the course of this fieldwork.

Nonetheless, this finding does not affect the basic proposition of this article, which is that curse accusations a prime competitor against the classical category of spirit affliction. This is because the present caseload of cursed clients is a fraction of a nation-wide operation of suspicions and accusations of curse affliction. It is important to emphasize that 1) a great number of cases are covered under a veil of secrecy for various social and familial reasons; thus, they have not reached the level of open accusations; 2) in contrast to cases of spirit affliction, curse accusations reveal a national tendency, which cuts across the population's divisions in terms of ethnic and religious affiliation. Plainly, Russians and other nationalities who live in Tyva also resort to shamans for dealing with curse-inflicted misfortunes. This is the distinctive element of counter-cursing practices in relation to the other services provided by shamans. The use of services of counter-cursing and retaliation is not limited to ethnic Tyvans, but includes Russians and other nationalities in Kyzyl.

A closer look at the cases of curse afflictions reveals that we are actually concerned with a non-traditional type of shamanic practice, which “recruits” clients as adherents to this modern cult of retribution. I present several cases for which I was able to collect sufficient data, based on discussions with the clients themselves. Although more than sixty clients consulted the headman and other

shamans of this association for problems involving curse afflictions, I was able to probe only ten of these cases due to obstacles related to confidentiality. This focus consisted in discussions with several of these clients, reconstructing thereby a chronicle of interpersonal tensions leading to suspicions of being cursed by an enemy in each case. In spite of this limited number of in-depth narratives of curse affliction, this research yielded a sufficient number of data, which permit us to validate the proposition that “curses” constitute an ascending explanation of serious offenses and misfortunes in Kyzyl. Moreover, an impressive aspect of these data is that the shamans’ offensive against “curses” amounts to a kind of supernatural intervention, which appeals to all the nationalities of Tyva.

What follows is a presentation of several cases, based on the author’s observations of the consultation process. A rather complex case concerned a middle-aged ethnic Tyvan man, who was living in Kyzyl as a retired engineer. This man appeared to be chronically ill due to some kind of brain dysfunction, which had caused him to experience serious problems in walking. Yet, by the time this consultation took place, his ability in walking had been completely restored. In a discussion we had in his own house, this man attributed his successful recovery to several therapeutic solutions, which he had adopted. Initially, he underwent treatment at the local hospital, which he found to be minimally effective. Next, he was treated with marmot fat (*tarbagan* in Tyvan), with which a native Kazakh healer massaged his legs – a treatment which had some noticeable effects, as this man reported. His treatment by the headman of the “Association of Shamans” was the last part of this quest for therapy. Remarkably, the latter treatment involved for this client a more or less permanent pattern of dependency from the shaman’s healing “power” (or “energy”). As the headman explained this during the consultation, this client must receive a new treatment each time the “energy” (which the headman ritually passes on to him) is depleted. Therefore, the problem at hand and its solution are reconstructed as a circle of “energy” depletion and renewal.

The treatment for this client was simple, and it lacked the full repertoire of ritual and symbolic functions present in many other counter-cursing consultations. As mentioned above, the aetiology of his brain-dysfunction was rather complex, owing to the presence of more than one cause associated with it. Years before this consultation, the client had been assaulted and beaten on his head

by street hooligans. Both the headman and his client agreed that this assault had been the primary cause of his problem – with the headman commenting that hospital treatment would be useless in this case. The headman argued that the chronicity of this dysfunction had exacerbated the client’s condition. Nonetheless, an additional cause emerged during the dialogue between shaman and client – something that rendered bio-medicine irrelevant to this case. That is, some time before this consultation, the client was caught into a brawl with an angry woman (other than his wife) who openly and loudly cursed him. Even though in our post-treatment discussion the client obviously downplayed the occult impact of this irate woman, the headman was steadfast that this acrimonious instance had added a dangerous (occult) second line of assault to a preexisting (physical) assault. Since it lacked the more dramatic or sensational parts of shamanic healing, which are revealed in the performance of *kamlaniye* (the shaman’s ritual performance), this treatment simply consisted in uttering invocations to “nature-spirits,” followed by massaging the client’s head and face as an “opening” for the shamanic “bio-energy” to enter through the client’s head.

This case illustrates a crucial aspect of the non-traditional type of practices, which are documented here. Namely, they address social tensions, which are endemic in many Siberian cities, such as the rise of criminal violence after the post-socialist transition. It appears that this new type of shamanic practice addresses pragmatic fears and anxieties, in addition to intangible and subjective concerns associated with sorcery and cursing. This finding is reflected in several cases from the sample of counter-cursing remedies (two of these are discussed below). A case of this kind, which concerned a Russian man, is the following one. This Russian client had brought a picture, showing himself and one of his business partners, whom he accused of embezzlement. He claimed that he had invested a large amount of money in a construction-scheme, without receiving any profits. This client was steadfast in his intention to avenge himself of his partner’s deceit by means of inflicting a drastic (death) penalty on his enemy. This purpose (or at least the deadly intention) was realized through the practicing of a “Kamlaniye” ritual by the headman, who assured the client that the enemy’s days would be numbered after this ritual.

It should be noted, though, that the clients, who patronize the Association’s shamans for interpersonal conflicts, do not always feel the need to ground their resentment on empirical and legally

valid accusations. Some of these individuals are firm believers in the idea that hostile magicians are as deadly as paid assassins are. Hence, they do not regard it as necessary to rationalize their accusations based on real and pragmatic situations of hostility and conflict – all the more so, given that concepts of non-empirical (occult) malignity are far from obsolete in this society. Additionally, the people who tend to refer serious problems to shamans are those who do not identify with Tyva's former communist legacy or, at any rate – alienated from Russia as a cardinal point of national identification. The disintegration of socialist ethics, along with a heightened sense of regional political autonomy, can be important factors in peoples' decision to disassociate themselves from the mainstream arenas of political order and to attempt to re-create harmony and personal order through an alternative "agency" originating in local religious culture.

As mentioned above, in some cases supernatural retaliation is undertaken on purely subjective grounds (i.e., suspicions of being cursed by enemies). I present several cases of this kind. A characteristic example was a ritual for cleansing from "curses," which a male migrant ordered for his business and family in Kyzyl. This man was a Muslim devout from a formerly satellite state of the Soviet Union. The reason that compelled him to seek a consultation was that his business – a small restaurant (*stolovaya* in Russian) – had suffered a steep decline in profit. This client suspected that one of his employees, a young woman who belonged to the same ethnic group of migrants in Kyzyl as he, had caused this financial loss by means of sorcery, which she had (allegedly) practiced out of antipathy. Nonetheless, the client refrained from directly confronting the subject of his personal tensions, fearing that this would entail unpleasant consequences for him (since it emerged that this young woman was married to one of his close friends, who was of the same nationality as he). In this case, the client's justification of his recourse to a shamanic remedy is entirely subjective, since it involves a belief that the enemy is practicing sorcery.

This tendency also emerges in one more case of (alleged) sorcery assault, which involved a couple of elderly ethnic Tuvans. These clients, who enjoyed old ties of friendship with the Association's headman, had been struck with a terrible misfortune; they saw their livestock being reduced in numbers due to some unknown disease. In the past, they had been caught in a conflict with another camp of herders who claimed the grazing

land stretching between the two camps as their own. According to the clients, these rivals demanded that no foreign livestock trespass the territory they claimed; furthermore, they made sure that these foreign incursions would stop by means of killing with sorcery a number of the livestock of these rivals (that is, the two clients). The headman affirmed his clients' accusations in the process of a "Kamlaniye" ritual, which he performed in the clients' yurt and camp; he even claimed that his assistant spirits had revealed to him the identity of the shaman whom the adversaries had hired in order to kill with sorcery.

In the latter two cases, the clients' accusations are not supported by testimonies of real (legal or other) action taken by the adversary – as the case described in the process will show. Nonetheless, even in these two cases described above, the clients' tensions originate in a rational appreciation of concrete threats surrounding their struggle to survive. In both cases the clients resort to supernatural aid in response to economic adversities, rather than simply because they imagine themselves as victims of cursing. Many of these clients are conscious of the culturally sanctioned "rules", which apply to the reasons or kinds of problems for consulting a shaman – especially if it is the more secretive and anxiety-inducing aspects of the shaman as a spiritual assassin which are in demand. Generally, people avoid consulting shamans for trivial personal problems or for minor illnesses (unless the matter is framed as a routine ritual for "cleansing" and for "protection" against bad "energies"). Although I was not able to verify this, a general lay theory circulated, according to which the shamans' spirits can "detect" unjustifiable claims for retaliation made by clients, who are thus expected to suffer for this fraudulent supplication of the spiritual hierarchy. The data on "counter-cursing" rituals suggest an appreciation of "shamanism" as an institution for dealing with intractable social problems – something that is dramatically manifest in the main case studies of this article.

First Case

The case documented here is somewhat unusual in light of the overall sample of consultations concerned with curse affliction. Its special character owes to the fact that it involves a parallel recourse to the redressive means provided by shamans and by the courts of law. Namely, in commissioning each of these two judicial forums, the client is

looking for an expeditious and drastic solution to a complicated conflict. An impressive feature of this consultation is the client's rationale for introducing a supernatural front of justice and retaliation to the legal procedure against her adversary. It will emerge that this appeal to a supernatural redress is intended as a remedy against an aspect of this interpersonal conflict, which is uncovered by the legal system. The latter aspect refers to the deadly ramifications of sorcery assault against this client. The events of this complex case are reconstructed below, based on the author's observations of the consultation.

The client was a divorced Russian woman, who had come to the "Association of Shamans" along with an ethnic Tuvan woman. The latter one facilitated the conversation between the Association's headman and the main client, translating thus into Russian parts of the information on "curses," which the headman was conveying in the Tuvan language. Nonetheless, for the most part, the consultation was conducted in Russian (a language in which the headman is also fluent). An additional reason for speaking Russian throughout this consultation was the headman's performance of psychologically instilling in this client the possibility of a drastic retaliation against her enemy. As we shall see, this performance involved this author's presence and identity as a scholar interested in shamanism and ritual healing.

After entering in the main consultation room, the two women sat on the bench alongside the headman's desk. Acting on behalf of the Russian client, the Tuvan woman briefly relayed the events leading them to commission his supernatural powers. It turned out that the client's troubles originated in a longstanding legal battle against her own ex-husband. The client, who was living in a private house in Kyzyl, claimed that she co-owned with her husband another house in an adjacent city. After they divorced, they agreed that, if the latter house were to be sold, the revenue would be shared between them. However, her ex-husband sold this house without her consent and kept the profit for himself. As the client herself revealed during the consultation, her ex-husband's decision to expropriate this property was due to the fact that he had been carrying on with a young woman. Incidentally, the latter woman was of the same age as their own son. In reaction to her ex-husband's withholding the funds from selling the house, the client filed a lawsuit against him. The latter also prosecuted her. Moreover, he filed another lawsuit against her, claiming the ownership of the house in Kyzyl where the client was living after her di-

voice. These interactions in the court of law had occurred three years before this consultation with the headman, yet no verdict had been issued. Furthermore, an even more devastating misfortune had befallen the client: one year before this consultation, her son died. As we shall see, an explanation of this misfortune will emerge from the headman's divination.

A question, which follows from the above account, concerns the relevance of shamanic remedies to the legal measures undertaken by both sides. As this case further unfolds, it will emerge that underway "occult" procedures were deployed by the enemies as a means of compromising each one's recourse to the normative agencies of justice. The account below will show that the official agencies are the surface reality of a cultural operation of retributive justice, which is governed by shamanic specialists. Following the client's testimony of her legal defense, the headman performed divination in order to unravel the enemy's secret strategy of waging war against her. The technique of divination was extremely simple, yet it was astonishingly revealing in terms of the enemy's deeper intentions. In this case, the practice of divination (involving forty-one small stones) consisted in "reading" the trajectories of all these stones, which the headman randomly threw on a purple mat, which was laid on his desk. The pattern of the stones reaffirmed the headman's conviction that a deadly curse affliction was secretly working against this client. A standard divinatory pattern was used in order to uncover the workings of the enemy's assault with "curses." That is, a pattern showing two white stones (representing the client herself and her daughter), which were surrounded by numerous black stones as symbols of "cursing."

The headman attributed the client's misfortunes to the sorcery, which her enemy had allegedly commissioned against her. Moreover, he identified the mystical cause of her son's death. According to this, the enemy had employed professional sorcerers in order to magically extract the vitality of his own son and sexually use this "life-force" for his affair with his young mistress! This "vampiric" foray into the boy's vitality was lethal for the latter one. Remarkably, instead of jeopardizing the shaman's diagnostic credibility, this divination increased the woman's indignation against her ex-husband. Characteristically, she exclaimed that her ex-husband's misdeeds had led her son to death. The headman responded to these laments with a performance centered on his "unique" abilities in healing and retaliation, engaging the author him-

self in the construction of his charisma. He introduced the author as a specialist in the anthropology of shamanism and religion, who had come from Cambridge in order to study his techniques. This affirms that the sources of present-day “authoritative” knowledge and practice in the revivalist shamanism of Tuva are reinforced by international registers of scholarly authority – as Galina Lindquist has shown in her studies of Tuvan shamanic revival (see 2005 and also 2011). The author’s involvement in the consultation constituted further “evidence” of *this* shaman’s capacity for restoring justice and inflicting punishments of an unprecedented scale.

The proceedings of this consultation lead to an important conclusion regarding why people in Tyva may opt for alternatives to the established mechanisms for dealing with conflicts. In general, shamans are consulted for difficult and longstanding interpersonal tensions and conflicts, which cannot be effectively solved by any other form of mediation. The rationalization of shamanic interventions to conflicts as a last recourse will also emerge in the case study described in the process. The events of the present case demonstrate an appropriation of certain religious strands, associated with “cursing,” in order to offset limitations and failures attributed to the official justice. The shaman’s explanation of the client’s troubles as an effect of “cursing” provides a relief from a culturally constituted form of anxiety and suspicions, which lie beyond the state’s jurisdiction. Thus, it could be argued that shamanic interventions in this legal conflict provide a psychological escape from the realization that a counter-offensive by legal and official means seldom yields the desirable outcome.

Following the divination of a deadly curse affliction, the consultation proceeded to several ritual measures aiming at protecting the client from the effects of the enemy’s occult offensive. As was the case in all counter-cursing consultations, the client was cleansed with juniper incense, with the shaman pronouncing a special invocation of the spirits, whereby he enlisted their defense against the enemy. After this, the shaman ritually removed the invisible remnants of the “curses” from the client, starting from her feet and moving upwards to her head. Throughout this process, the movements of his hands indicated that he was removing something invisible, while at the same time he was struggling to overcome the enemy’s “magical” resistance from afar. This session lasted approximately one hour; the client was told that one more

cleansing session, in her house this time, would be necessary for the enemy’s “curses” to be expelled.

An important conclusion emerging from this case concerns the existence of an objective basis for pursuing one’s own justifiable claims through shamanic actions. This means that the client justifies her decision to resort to retaliation, based on a real dispute. Affliction with curses does not appear to be the primary motive for seeking a supernatural redress. Instead, the importance of “cursing,” as a ramification of this legal conflict, is revealed in the process of this consultation. The upshot of this finding is that in some cases accusations of curse affliction may not be a major incentive for enlisting shamanic vengeance against an enemy. In resorting to this solution, the shamans’ clients anticipate a kind of justice and punishment, which transcends the limits of modern law – as the following case demonstrates.

Second Case

A Tuvan woman in her early 30s, an accountant by profession, was at daggers drawn with her boss. She claimed that the boss – a middle-aged woman with no family of her own – systematically subjected her to a tyrannical regime of working and humiliated her as a person who indulged her own sexual desire at the expense of her office duties. Aylana, as I will call this client, contended that the boss had attempted to murder her with a witch as an accomplice. Her accusation rests on a particular interpretation of some rather controversial evidence. Briefly stated, she described a weird synergy of various events in her office. Just before lunchtime, a client approached her to have his paperwork done. At that moment, an old Armenian gypsy woman (a national symbol of sorcery in Tuva) came in, allegedly selling various things. The boss came out of her office, left a cup of tea on Aylana’s desk (an offer that would be unthinkable for professionals involved in a “cold war” relation), and invited the Armenian visitor in her office. Aylana was adamant that this “polite offer” was a trap, which her boss set up to keep her busy and kill her with “curses.”

Rather than interpreting the Armenian woman’s visitation as a coincidence, Aylana thought that this “closed meeting” in her employer’s office had been prearranged by the latter as a means of achieving her murderous intentions. In fact, indirect evidence of this plan came from the employer herself. Immediately after this secret session was concluded, she came out of her office and ap-

proached her employees (all of them young females) in a state of excitement. According to Aylana, who was anxiously and silently watching these events unfold, while she was sitting behind her desk, the employer vaguely reported that the Armenian woman's magic (*magiya* in Russian) would enable her to fulfil all her desires! Viewed as a whole, the events of this case lead to the hypothesis that the purpose of this magic was no other than satisfying the administrator's murderous fantasies.

Sometime after this incident, Aylana was humiliated once more by her boss, due to an alleged interest in the latter's senior position. Her confession following reveals how an interpersonal conflict pushed her to resort to a supernatural redress, instead of the courts of law, in order to fulfill her fantasy of having the enemy punished:

I rushed to my apartment, and the same night I cursed her, not loudly, but from within my soul: "God, where are you looking at? Why did she offend me so badly? God, if you really exist, why don't you punish that woman?"¹

Several other aspects of this strained relationship between Aylana and her employer further establish the unseen role that shamans, as purveyors of supernatural justice, perform in crises occurring within contexts regulated by the state. A few months before Aylana was removed from her office, she had lodged a written petition to a senior authority. This petition had also been signed by other employees in her office, and the purpose of this letter was to expose the employer's unjust and cruel manners. Yet nothing changed. Therefore, confronted with the impossibility of redressing injustice by ordinary procedures, Aylana appealed to an alternative source of justice delivered by supernatural agencies. As a representative of these agencies, the headman cleansed her from the "curses" (as described in the previous case). Next, he donned his ritual attire and performed a vibrant ritual of chanting and beating the drum, in order to call upon the spirits from the client's homeland in the provinces of Tyva and to ask them to heal "their child." Remarkably, this ritual procedure resembled proceedings in courtrooms. While invoking the spirits, the headman introduced several distinct verses addressing these spirits, thereby assuring these "authorities" that his client had done

nothing wrong and that she deserved their protection.

Conclusions

I would like to focus on the latter case of invoking the divine as an arbiter of justice for tensions endemic in daily human affairs, for it offers a unique point of entry into an emergent culture of justice, which is embodied by ritual virtuosos in retaliation (i.e., shamans) at the margin of the law. Studies of legal pluralism in non-Western contexts have revealed the complex and hybrid features of indigenous systems of jurisprudence in their encounter with colonial law. This emerges, for instance, from the well-documented cases of African customary law, which is bound to a dialectic relation with state law. This "co-existence of legal cultures" (Good 2008) entails a revival of customary law in an institutionalized form, under the impact of colonial culture, that is, a process whereby old conventions are reconstituted in a law-like form (Fuller 1994: 10). In postcolonial settings (e.g. in South Africa) such agencies – representatives of culture and religion, for example, the Pentecostal Church and faith-based services – have grown into what Jean Comaroff calls "theocracies." In other words, religious movements are taking over social services relinquished by the neo-liberal state "as part of a quest for the total reclamation of the social sphere" (2009: 24).

It is within such an extended context, I suggest, that the problem of shamanic retaliation versus official justice must be seen. Since their inception in the early 1990s, shamanic associations in Tuva have focused a substantial part of ritual practices on the remedy of alcoholism, depression, and other social ills associated with a high rate of crime in Siberia, as well as of illnesses, which would call for professional medical or psychiatric referral. Let us review the Russian client's case presented earlier, since it intersects the normative and religious segments of the extended "judicial system" in Tuva. Her legal dispute over property ownership is only the public (visible) edge of an undercurrent of conflict, which is expressed in a divination that her ex-husband is the perpetrator of deadly cursing. Thus, her decision to back up her case in court with extra-legal (shamanic) representation seems perfectly rational, if not inevitable, given the cultural stressors underlying her legal conflict. However, more importantly, her case suggests that in this society shamanism has crossed the border between religion and politics or law, taking on

¹ A part of this narrative appears also elsewhere (Zorbas 2015: 416), where it is analyzed in the context of Obeyesekere's well known study of sorcery as a "functional alternative" to aggression in Sri Lanka (1975).

functions such as an insurance policy against state failure or a judiciary sensitive to cultural evidence of “crime” (i.e., curse affliction). In filling vital gaps in the work of justice, shamans offer to their clients an alternative way to justice, which transcends limitations associated with the official agencies.

In these consultations, shamans metaphorically create analogies between their own experiences of initiation (and religious vocation) and their clients’ experiences of distress in the present. In his consultations with cursed individuals, the headman used to narrate his own transition from a victim of Soviet persecutions into a young shaman who had “inherited” from his shaman-grandmother a “gift” of retaliating against Soviet officials. While removing curses from clients, the headman regularly justified the retaliatory aspect of his religious practice as a cognitive skill naturally developed in response to the Soviet purges. This (shamanic) capacity for retaliation appears in stories of local Soviet officials, who died after being cursed by old repressed shamans. These are stories which modern shamans often bring into their consultations, offering thus to oppressed and tormented individuals, like the two clients presented above, a potential to “indulge in a fantasy satisfaction” of their desire to retaliate (Obeyesekere 1975: 21; cf. Hallowell 1948: 204).

For many of these citizens the shaman’s self-presentation as someone who has suffered unjustly, but is also capable of taking revenge, may be more appealing than impersonal structures of law enforcement (i.e., courts). This is further indicated by the criminal past of several of these “shaman-killers”: that is, a three-digit number, printed on the arms of several of these men, which “advertised” their identity as ex-convicts for various crimes. This is a unique piece of evidence, which suggests that “shamanism” may offer to an “ex-criminal” a path to religious devotion, while developing and legitimating his spiritual vocation as

a supernatural killer by making the killing righteous.

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