

**RESORTING TO SHAMANIC AGENCIES:  
FILLING IN FOR THE FAILURE OF THE OFFICIAL  
INSTITUTIONS IN A SIBERIAN PERIPHERY  
(TYVA REPUBLIC, RUSSIA)**

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**Abstract.** Drawing on a field study of shamanic remedies against affliction with curses in Tyva Republic (Siberia), this paper offers striking documentation of an ‘agency’ of social control and justice which is officially unseen by the Russian state. The paper identifies several crucial social implications of ‘shamanism’ as an unofficial redress for kinds of occult-mediated conflict which transcend the limits of state jurisdiction. The data on shamanic counter cursing and retaliatory practices provide evidence of the proliferation in Tyva of a pattern of interpersonal violence, associated with lethal appropriations of the ‘occult’ for rational purposes. The argument is advanced that the post-socialist ‘return’ of shamanic religion in the form of a ‘judicial offensive’ against misuses of the ‘occult’ in Tyva signifies a notable departure of ‘shamanism’ from typical meanings of traditional religion which emerge from the state’s law.

**Keywords:** ‘shamanism’, aggression, curse accusations, injustice, social control, Siberia

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## **1. Introduction**

On an afternoon of April 2003, the normal activities of an Association of Shamans in the capital city of Tyva Republic, Kyzyl, were disrupted by an unprecedented incident. While I was approaching the gate of this Association, I saw a person familiar to me, who was covered in blood and was lying on the ground half-conscious, helplessly trying to uphold his back against the Association’s fence. Behind the fence, an irate woman, who lived in a house nearby and was working as the Association’s concierge, was loudly cursing this young man, before successively blowing a heavy wooden log onto his bleeding head. As I was told later, this brutal attack (by an otherwise pleasant and good-mannered woman)

was due to the fact that this man, who was her son-in-law, was drinking and abusing her daughter (who was his wife).

Just as this violent incident was on the verge of a homicide, the Association's Headman arrived in his Soviet-style *Volga* car (a gift from Tyvan government-officials in compensation for his shamanic ancestors' killing by the Soviet persecutors several decades earlier). In his business-style dark suit (a sign that he was advising politicians how to govern the state with occult-devised policies), the Headman steadily walked toward his office inside the Association, looking at this woman and exclaiming *eeei* (expressing thus his contempt for this violent attack). The other shamans returned to their affairs in the Association's premises. Having witnessed all this, I could not but comfort myself by thinking that the Association's marginal location in the city's impoverished and 'shadowy districts' (*tiomnye raiony*, in Russian) enshrouded this near-murder under a veil of secrecy that can hardly be found in the often heavily policed quarters of Kyzyl's city centre<sup>1</sup>.

Even though by no means representing the state of social relations in Tyva at large, the persons who are involved in above episode, can be viewed and interconnected with each other as variant forms of a cultural repertoire of violence and aggression in Tyva – as I shall argue in this paper. Of course, the 'violent' kinds of shamanism and sorcery, whose implications for the social order in this Siberian territory we shall examine, substantially differ from the empirically demonstrable tools and techniques involved in homicide and violent crimes. In other words, the practices examined in this paper, pertain to a realm of subjectively felt suffering, which members of this society experience as an outcome of a sorcerer's offensive practices against them. This distinct strand of occult killings, whose effects are detectable by means of the oracles used by diviners and healers, is amply documented in the ethnography of sorcery (or witchcraft, for that matter) and of shamanic, and broadly ritual, interventions in misfortune (see, for instance, Evans-Pritchard 1937, Bohannan 1957, Douglas 1970, Favret-Saada 1980, Geschiere 2006; 1997, Batianova 2000, Riboli & Torri 2013).

In Tyva the people who solicit shamanic intervention in interpersonal conflicts are – like the clients discussed by Gananath Obeyesekere in a well-known essay on practices of retaliatory sorcery in Sri Lanka (1975) – aware of the differences between supernatural weapons and material ones. In this seminal essay Obeyesekere, a Sri Lankan anthropologist himself, sets out to demonstrate on the

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<sup>1</sup> It was one of the shamans of this Association, a young woman who was one of my close informants throughout my fieldwork, who threw into relief my fears that this incident could be discovered by the police. It looked as though the presence of the police was becoming less visible, as one moved away from the city's orderly square – with its postal and financial services next to Kyzyl's parliament (the so called 'Great *Khural*', in Tuvan) and the central governmental building locally known (in Russian) as *Belyi Dom* (White House) – toward the unruly and sometimes unsafe neighborhoods of Kyzyl, which extend into the Siberian steppe. In the beginning of my fieldwork in Kyzyl, I was attacked by a group of young street 'criminals' who demanded some money and cigarettes in order to let me go unscathed. This happened after visiting a shaman's client, whose (Soviet-style) apartment was in a remote district.

basis of his ethnography of sorcery practices offered by Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim priests at public shrines in this country, that the criminological statistics computed by the local government agencies show a bias toward spontaneous over premeditated violence. Accordingly, Obeyesekere argues that the latter picture is drastically reversed, once we take into account the proliferation in Sri Lanka of sorcery as a method of killing or harming an enemy, which is a kind of rational crime. Thus, retaliatory sorcery is functionally equivalent and structurally similar to the premeditated murder, as far as the process of commissioning sorcerers as paid assassins and the motives of the latter actors (i.e. homicide) are concerned.

The relevance of these premises to the present analysis will be revealed, once we probe the intriguing cultural aspects of the conflicts which the shamans handle. The ethnographic materials we will consider below are suggestive of a new kind of conflict in this part of Asiatic Russia, which is constituted of a synergy of occult violence and unlawful conduct associated with the enemy. The latter is thought of as commissioning professional sorcery in order to intensify the impact of his or her *real*, unlawful behaviour in relation to the victim. This synergy of unlawfulness and occult-mediated violence illuminates a 'shadowy' (namely, an officially undocumented) operation of social conflict which is governed by shamans as catalysts and healers of affliction with curses.

The analysis of this synergy of intangible and physical strands of aggression in Tyva will delineate the social context of the rise of shamanic retaliatory practices in the capital city, Kyzyl. The data will suggest that the retaliatory, or 'counter cursing' (since they involve retaliation in kind at the client's request), consultations are an index of a social operation of misanthropy, which proliferates in contexts infested with kinds of risk and anxiety which are omnipresent in post-socialist Russia. Moreover, the data on the motives of individuals who resort to shamanic justice, are instructive regarding a re-orientation of a whole strand of contemporary revivalist shamanic practice toward fulfilling a series of pragmatic goals borne from the conditions of life in post-socialist Tyva.

The ethnographic data of this study were collected by this author in the course of twelve months of fieldwork with shamans and their clients in an 'Association of Shamans' in Kyzyl in 2002/03. During the year of this fieldwork<sup>2</sup>, there were four shamanic 'Associations' (Societies) in Kyzyl. These Associations are officially registered as 'religious organizations' whose 'personnel' consists of shamanic specialists in the practice of specific kinds of rituals or remedies for clients (see in the process). The institutionalisation of the traditional shamanic vocation in the context of religious organizations is closely linked with the official restoration of 'shamanism' as one of the 'traditional confessions' of the autonomous Republic of Tyva after the collapse of the Soviet regime<sup>3</sup> (see Lindquist 2011). In this paper

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<sup>2</sup> My fieldwork in Tyva Republic was funded by an Individual Research Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation in New York.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to 'shamanism', Buddhism and the Russian Orthodox Church (referring to ethnic Tuvans and Russians respectively) were established as 'traditional' religions in post-Soviet Tyva.

we shall examine a special strand of this restoration of shamanic religion in Tyva, which is unsanctioned by the Russian government. The analysis will focus on remedial consultations, concerned with accusations of curse affliction and sorcery, which the headman of this Association performed for clients suffering from curse afflictions. In focusing on the remedial and retaliatory practices of this shaman during the year of my research in Tyva, I documented the social impact of 'shamanism' as an institution which operates on the basis of the same rational principles as the state's agencies of social control.

## **2. Kinds of anxiety and motives for resorting to the shamanic redress**

The foregoing argument of a legally undocumented strand of shamanic retaliatory justice, which originates in the state-sponsored religious revival in Tyva and is concerned with the regulation of social tensions beyond the limits of state law, compels us to consider the repertoire of the services offered by the shamans of this Association.

It will emerge that counter cursing practices involve a special class of 'religious' phenomena, which bear more relevance to behaviours characteristic of premeditated crimes against life than to various traditional religious customs which abound in Tyva. Briefly stated, the features which single out these rituals as intentional acts of harming or killing an enemy are the following. First, they require the clients to calculate their moves in terms of confidentiality, as well as in terms of criteria of efficiency in harming their enemy by supernatural means, which are associated with a given specialist. Second, they occur more infrequently than other shamanic services such as: divination, rituals of sending off the souls of dead relatives to the otherworld, and various practices of cleansing from impure or noxious spirits, as well as family-based ceremonies for supplicating ancestral or nature spirits for wellbeing. In fact, the type of ritual we examine is a fraction within the sample of consultations from this Association (which includes approximately sixty rituals dealing with curse afflictions). Viewed in relation to all the other ritual services, divination is the most frequently sought service (the significance of the latter fact is considered below).

In light of the above data, a crucial observation is in order: in identifying an infrequent incidence of counter cursing consultations within this sample, one should not assume that the demand for counter cursing services in Tyva is insignificant. For one thing, this small sample of curse removals excludes similar practices offered by the other three Associations in Kyzyl and several more in Tyva's provincial towns, as well as by the hundreds of ritual specialists privately working in Kyzyl and elsewhere in Tyva. Hence, the sample of counter cursing consultations appears to be very small in relation to the other services documented above for this Association; nonetheless, this sample expands when the large numbers of practitioners ranging from shamans to spiritual healers and Russian style 'extra-sensors' are taken into account. This conclusion can be inferred from

the laypersons' (both ethnic Tuvans and Russians) interest in the secret knowledge of cursing which I had elicited from shamans – an interest which evolved into these informants' confessions of being cursed by their enemies in some cases!

The practice of divination – for causes ranging from finding lost objects or missing people to predicting whether one's marriage would be happy – is very popular among lay Tuvans. Thus, when a client resorts to professional diviners, the intention is to gain knowledge about a crucial matter or a misfortune whose causes remain unknown<sup>4</sup>. The extensive demand for professional divination in Kyzyl is due to the following reasons: divination is relatively simple to perform (although unique skills in interpreting the arrangement of the stones are crucial for a reliable verdict); unlike the counter cursing rituals, its practice does not require planning in terms of confidentiality and protection of personal data (since no ritual activity is involved and the problem at hand is not disclosed to external observers); and its price (10 roubles) is within the average means of the low-income people, who are the majority in Tyva.

Next to divination, we encounter the ceremonies which ethnic Tuvans customarily order in order to see off the souls of their dead relatives to the other world. These ceremonies, which people perform with either shamans or Buddhist priests (lamas), are known in an abbreviated form, as 'seven days' or 'forty nine days' (after death). The soul's need for an acknowledgment of its posthumous existence is a central concept in Tuvan beliefs about the afterlife, which are informed by Buddhist precepts of reincarnation. This rebirth is possible through a ritual process which transforms the dead from a soul dangerous to its relatives into an ancestor waiting to be reborn. Rituals of seeing off the departed ones are performed successively on the 7th and 49th day after death (although the total price for having both ceremonies, which is equivalent to a month's salary in Tyva, compels many to observe only one of these two ceremonies). According to my data, approximately three hundred souls were sent off by the Association's shamans in the course of a year. This is an expected figure, if we think that popular ideological commitment to this custom, associated with an anxiety of incurring the displeasure of an ancestor's neglected soul, lead people to sacrifice their income for this inevitable procedure.

The prevalence of practices of divination and of rituals for the dead is expressed in an interesting comment by the headman of this Association of Shamans in Kyzyl, an experienced Tuvan shaman in his mid-fifties. In his own words: "Eventually people die and their souls must be accompanied to heaven. Also, they are beset with misfortunes or problems for which they seek a solution, such as finding auspicious days for travelling or identifying the perpetrator of a theft or damage. In addition, other people are attacked by various noxious spirits

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<sup>4</sup> The standard divinatory technique performed by the shamans of this Association involved the 'reading' of the trajectories of forty one small stones arranged in three columns on a purple mat. A result of three stones in the front of each column signified that 'the way is closed' (*doroga zakryta*, in Russian).

and they need shamans in order to perform rituals for cleansing their houses or their cars”.

This is how the headman replied to my question of what would happen if Tuvans stopped cursing each other, throwing my uncertainties into relief by means of an imaginative remark: *‘azhyl kham chok arbas’* (a shaman cannot end up unemployed, in Tuvan). The fact that shamans are concerned with finding solutions to complex problems and unfathomable crimes (ranging from thefts to serious misfortunes allegedly perpetrated by known enemies and their shamanic accomplices) is reaffirmed in the data on the practising of divination. Many clients confided to the shamans their anxiety before a long trip (a rational kind of anxiety, given a realistic sense of hazard that overshadows transportation in the provinces of Tyva).

The following case provides evidence of the reinvention of ritual and magical practices as an alternative to controlling rational kinds of uncertainty, associated with the perceived absence of an efficient state-mechanism. The client of this consultation was an ethnic Tuvan man, who was planning to travel by car from Kyzyl to Ulan-Ude – the capital city of the adjacent Republic of Buryatiya. This client was overcome with fear before this long-distance trip with his car, since he would be accompanied by his wife, who was a Buryat. Moreover, this client confided to the headman that he had had problems with alcohol-addiction which he had managed to control to some extent. The purpose of his visit to the Association was to receive a divination concerning an auspicious day for venturing on this ‘arduous’ trip. After consulting his divinatory stones and providing this client with more information on which dates are ‘good for travelling’, the headman cleansed him from the ‘curses’ which had caused his alcohol-addiction, by means of an unusual ritual procedure. Namely, he presented the skull of a bear which he kept among his ritual instruments, and rubbed the client’s head with the upper surface of the bear’s skull! The symbolism of this remedial act was explicit; the physical contact with this ‘ritual object’ was a means of transferring to this client the healing and cleansing properties of the ‘Bear-Spirit’ (*Adyg-Eeren*, in Tuvan) – which was the headman’s major assistant-spirit. The client was further cleansed from the ‘curses’ by means of a special ritual performance, during which the headman encircled this client with juniper incense and uttered several verses of his own invocation of the spirits – requesting their ‘protection’ (*kamgalal*, in Tuvan) for this client.

Moreover, the most memorable (and emotionally intense) of these cases concerned a young Tuvan woman who was hopelessly searching for her mother who had gone missing. Strikingly, the shaman who practised divination for this client, concluded that the chances of finding her mother were virtually non-existent. This was a rather exceptional case, given that divination generally aims at alleviating the clients’ anxieties, by means of pronouncing or foreseeing auspicious events. Nonetheless, an impressive finding about ‘shamanism’ is borne from these data on shamanic divinatory practices. Namely, the data suggest the presence of a deeper analogy or similarity between the operations of state agencies and various

unofficial actors, associated with shamanic religious revival in Tyva. First, it emerges that various shamans are increasingly relevant to providing (ritual) remedies for intractable problems, which emerge from the perceived absence of the official state. Second, the above cases reveal that ‘shamanism’ in Tyva is invested with kinds of rational thinking and social expectations which people usually associate with the official agencies of social order. In the process, the analysis will focus on one specific aspect of this correlation between official and supernatural agencies of social control. Namely, evidence will emerge that ‘shamanism’ may function as an alternative to the state’s procedures of delivering justice and redressing wrongs.

These preliminary data on the motives compelling people in Kyzyl – who, as we shall see, include also Russians and other nationalities of Tyva – to have recourse to shamanic services introduce an important feature of the professionalized practices we examine, which will also emerge in the counter cursing consultations below. That is, in many cases the shamans are consulted for pragmatic questions and problems, such as decisions regarding one’s professional orientation or the appropriateness of travelling on a certain date. These problems are directly relevant to the challenges of unemployment and safety in transportation found in the (Russian and, generally, modern) state; yet no immediate solutions are available to these problems. The availability of the unofficial recourse, documented here, is filling state-derived social deficits. The clients who opt for these services, and especially for retaliating against an enemy’s offence, expect concrete outcomes; as, for instance, overcoming a pressing and difficult situation or having the enemy punished severely and expeditiously.

Where does this overview of shamanic services which are in demand in the capital city of Tuva, lead us in relation to this paper’s focus on counter cursing rituals as a special category of the shamans’ professionalized practices? The fact that the latter practice appears in our sample to occur much less frequently than other services reveals an important sociological aspect of the consultations we examine: i.e. that commissioning shamans for retaliation requires the client to plan the actualisation of this motive in terms of a careful consideration of the following steps: finding an effective and reliable shamanic specialist, something that usually involves mobilizing one’s friends and relatives; second, making sure that the enemy will not find about this action.

Hence, evidence emerges in respect to the pragmatic and rational nature of the category of ritual practice we analyse here: that is, for individuals labouring under a sense of injustice, as in the cases documented below, shamanic retaliatory practices offer an alternative to overt confrontation and violence. These practices function in a way similar to Sri Lanka’s retaliatory sorcery practices, which Obeyesekere analyses as a form of rational crime which is equivalent to pre-meditated murder (1975). Our counter cursing cases too indicate that aggressive and hostile motives may be channelled away from overt violence to an alternative custom in Tyva; that is, the vindictive supernatural techniques which are offered by shamans.

### **3. Seeking justice beyond the state: ‘shamanism’ as an unintended consequence**

If one attempts to represent the operations of the shamanic delivery of justice in the capital city of Tyva, the design that would very likely emerge is the following: a city of 100.000 residents, which is cut across by imperceptible arrows of occult ‘power’, projected by shamans during their rituals. This ‘continuum of violence’, as it will be described in the process, leads us to consider a more general context of religious revival in post-Soviet Tyva – a territory the size of Greece, with a population of 310.000<sup>5</sup>, which is located on Russia’s western frontier with Mongolia.

Incorporated into Soviet Russia only in 1944, Tyva is widely regarded as a stronghold of shamanic traditions during the period of atheist propaganda and political repression till the late 1980s. Shamanism, Buddhism and the Russian Orthodox Church were widely repressed during the Soviet rule of Tyva. Nonetheless, shamanic practices withstood the Soviet modernization, through clandestine healing rituals in inaccessible herding camps throughout these years. Presently, the successors of these old shamans claim to possess an intimate knowledge of the shamanic rituals, which they obtained either through secret apprenticeship close to these ancestors or through experiences of a ‘revelation’ in visions or dreams (which started to occur when the new political conditions in post-Soviet Tyva facilitated the re-emergence of shamans).

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, an ongoing religious revival has been evolving in Tyva, in a fashion similar to movements of ethnic and cultural revitalisation among Siberian peoples; a process documented in relevant ethnographic studies on Tyva (see Lindquist 2011; 2008; 2005, Pimenova 2013, Zorbas 2015; 2013; 2007)<sup>6</sup>. Scholarship has extensively accounted for the emergence of new contexts of spirituality throughout Siberia, where ‘shamanism’ plays a central role (see, for instance, Vitebsky 2002; 1995, Halemba 2003, Jokic 2008, Hoppal, 2013, Balzer 2008; 1996; 1993). In these contexts, the concept of shamanism corresponds to new indigenous formations of ecological knowledge and spiritual awareness, merging indigenous concepts of ‘animism’ and environmental concerns. Moreover, shamanism is being revitalized as an ethnic expression of cultural heritage (as in Tyva and the adjacent Republics of Altai and Buryatiya), for the purposes of claiming political sovereignty at the regional level.

Nonetheless, here I shall focus on an unusual aspect of shamanic revival, which is related to ritual practices of retaliation. Although they constitute an important channel for the handling of social tensions, these practices are not sanctioned by the state. They exist as an unintended consequence of the legitimization of shamanism as a traditional confession in Tyva Republic.

<sup>5</sup> This figure includes approximately 244,000 ethnic Tuvans and 65,000 Russians. Additionally, small numbers of Mongols, Kazak, and migrants from Central Asian countries live in Tyva.

<sup>6</sup> To these works we must add a strand of scholarship on Tuvan shamanism by local (Tyvan) and Russian ethnographers (Kenin-Lopsan 2002; 1995, Vainshtein 1984; 1978; 1964).

A note on ‘shamanism’ before we proceed to the ethnographic materials: I shall avoid offering a definition of shamanism, an issue which has been addressed in the literature (see, for instance, Eliade 1964, Lewis 1971, Atkinson 1992, Riches 1994, Vitebsky 1995, Morris 2006). While shamans are defined as inspired priests, engaging in trance (an experience of ‘magical flight’ and communion with the spirits) for various purposes, it will emerge that this definition hardly describes the practices dealt with here. There is nothing sensational about removing curses from clients’ bodies; unless one is fascinated by the aesthetically alarming picture of a shaman growling and shrieking, while laying hands on the client’s bare body in order to remove the (invisible for laypeople) ‘curses’ and magically dispose them off to the Association’s yard. Even though the removal of ‘curses’ is qualitatively different from having a tooth removed by a dentist, the idea of a physiological infection (with curses) is central to their operation, just as the experience of pain is: it was not uncommon for many clients to cry in reaction to the shaman’s touching the infested parts of their bodies. On their own part, the shamans of this Association described the “mechanism” of curse affliction as follows: after the enemy’s ‘curses’ have invaded the victim’s body, their impact is manifest in a concrete form, i.e. a cancerous tumour. According to this, shamans can diagnose the mystical origins of any disease in curse affliction, because, when the ‘curses’ are removed from the client’s body, they take on the appearance of the client’s enemy and occult offender.

Trance, as well as inspirational practices characteristic of shamanic vocation, are equally absent from these ritual operations on the patients’ bodies. A crucial point: curse removals do not only involve the shaman’s physical contact with the client, but also what Levi-Strauss called ‘a psychological manipulation’ of a woman’s uterus in his famous essay on the effectiveness of shamanic symbols by analogy to psychoanalysis (1963). In Tyva this manipulation involves the shaman’s chanting and drumming (*kamlaniye*, in Russian), by which the patient is cleansed from the ‘curses’ which are returned to the initial offender in retaliation for an unjustifiable offence. The shamans’ chants of invoking the spirits abound with expressions of the spirits’ attention to the client’s suffering. These chants are specially designed to imbue the client with kinds of insight which the shamans described as ‘faith’ or more precisely as ‘self-suggestion’ (*samo-vnusheniye*, in Russian; *suzuk*, in Tuvan<sup>7</sup>); namely, a personal belief in the client’s strength in overcoming a crisis. Nonetheless, this pervasive aesthetics of the healing performance does not lead the shaman to experience trance or transition to mentally dissociative states. Whenever an experience of ‘trance’ occurs during a shaman’s ‘ritual’ (known as *kamlaniye*, in Russian), it receives mild expressions (such as visible changes in the shaman’s face, due to the laborious drumming and chanting and the intense mental efforts at visualizing the events behind an affliction with curses).

Thus, the rituals I observed were devoid of the alarming trances documented in the classic ethnography of shamanism in North Asia (see Shirokogoroff 1935).

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<sup>7</sup> This latter term was explained by the shamans as a sense of inspiration which emerges from religious faith. Characteristic is the expression *suzuk bile emneer* (healing by means of instilling faith in the client).

Contemporary shamans with an appreciation for local tradition, as the headman, responded to my frustration about the absence of trance-rituals as follows: “With those city-born clients we cannot perform like the old shamans, because this will frighten them away”. A sociological reason for the absence of trance-rituals emerges, once we realize that these clients’ accusations of curse affliction are only the surface of complex interpersonal conflicts which transcend the capacities of state law. Therefore, an alleviation of such ‘rationalistic’ problems by means of a ritual ‘pandemonium’ would impel these bewildered clients into a mental abyss, rather than instil in them the possibility for a personal transformation.

These considerations have very important implications regarding the social role of shamans in contemporary Tyva. It will emerge that claims as pragmatic and evidence-grounded as expropriation of private property, abuse by senior professionals, and embezzlement demand that equally rational means of redress are available in a society, either by means of the state’s legal system or by means of other structures, which are seen as a culturally sanctioned mechanism for redressing injustice.

I argue that in Tyva this latter expectation may be fulfilled through shamanic retaliation. If counter cursing practices are viewed as a kind of redress for violent and unlawful behaviours, it follows that an analysis of ‘shamanism’ in relation to justice in Tyva must be placed within a larger perspective than the state’s attribution of a ‘religious’ and a ‘secular’ sphere of sovereignty to these two customs respectively. Shamanism, one of the traditional confessions, is defined by the official law as a religious custom, which is relevant only to its pilgrims<sup>8</sup>; not as an operation which transects the religiously and ethnically diverse population of Tyva, in the form of supernatural sanctions for crimes which are ungovernable by the justice system. This ‘latent’ function of shamans is reflected in the data presented in the process.

#### 4. The continuum of violence: specialists, tools, and deadly motives

*“Without the shamans, people in Tyva will cut each other’s throats”.*  
A comment by the Association’s headman

*“Bring your drum here, Kostya<sup>9</sup>, and treat the clients like we do. If you do not practice, how will you understand what a client suffers from?”*

Critique by a ‘black shaman’ of the Association

Black shamans (known as *kara kham* in Tuvan) held a special status in the headman’s Association. To them were assigned the most difficult cases of curse

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<sup>8</sup> These principles are described in a “*Law on Freedom of Conscience and of Religious Organizations*” (in effect since 1995), which was introduced by the parliament of Tuva.

<sup>9</sup> My own name in Russian.

affliction, since they were seen as apt in dealing with curse afflictions<sup>10</sup>; and also as being intimately connected to the ‘evil’ spirits (thought of as inhabiting an underground world, *Erlık Oran*). This intimacy with spiritual dangers accounted for their fearsome character, since black shamans are believed to employ these spirits for both healing and killing. In some instances, killing and healing overlap in their treatments for critically ill persons: that is, a transient killing by introducing ‘evil’ spirits to the patient’s body, which is then emptied of these spirits and is filled with ‘heavenly’ ones, giving the patient a second lease of life. Thus, black shamans dismantled distinctions between darkness and light, which the self-proclaimed ‘heavenly’ or ‘white’ shamans (*ak khamnar*), like the headman, sustained with their penchant for upward social mobility in the hierarchy of the spirit world, as well as in the hierarchy of local politics (as unofficial consultants for politicians).

Despite the fact that specializations of the black or white hereditary line are widely invoked by most Tuvan practitioners nowadays, it should be noted that the shamanic experience of one’s own self as bound to a particular ancestral spirit hardly falls into a single category. For instance, the headman’s vocation involved a synergy of two ancestral spirits competing for prevalence within their own successor: his ‘heavenly’ shaman-grandmother and his distant ancestor, a shaman inspired by a spirit causing ‘madness’<sup>11</sup>. This uneasy accommodation of two powerful ancestors within their successor (a co-existence that is vital for one’s existence as a shaman; renegeing on an ancestor is a deadly act) challenges categorical divisions of shamans. Likewise, although they associate themselves with discreet groups of spirits, all shamans equally draw on the healing and destructive aspects of an undifferentiated continuum of occult power for their clients.

In addition to shamans, laypeople partake of this continuum of violence – at least as regards the capacity for inflicting harm with curses. A ‘curse’ (*prokliatiye*, in Russian), either in anger at somebody offending you or in envy and antipathy for somebody’s happiness or success, is seen as a potentially deadly affliction, spreading to the afflicted person’s household, unless a ritual cleansing is performed on the house and its members. Such was the case of a divorced couple of Russians, who had prosecuted each other for the ownership of a house (where the woman was living with their daughter, after the death of their son). The Headman explained this death as the work of sorcerers whom the enemy had allegedly hired in order to get rid of his family in favour of his young mistress. This client, who was overcome with grief throughout the proceedings, was then

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<sup>10</sup> Besides this, they practiced the same functions as all the other shamans. Curse removals were not offered only by the Association’s two black shamans; age and seniority were crucial determinants of a shaman’s capacity for dealing with curses, with the headman (drawing a shamanic descent from his grandmother, a ‘great black shaman’) reserving the first place for himself.

<sup>11</sup> These ‘mad’ shamans assumed their spiritual vocation in order to cure themselves from a mental affliction associated with a demonic spirit (known as *albys*).

cleansed from the enemy's curses, which – according to the headman – were causing her problems in walking<sup>12</sup>.

This imagery of 'cursing' as a multitude of trajectories of evil thoughts cutting across not only one's domestic space, but also legal and civil institutional contexts appears also in another case. We note in the previous case that the enemy's curses are led by a *rational* motive; namely, the eviction of his family from the house by means of a kind of violence which is sanctioned as a crime by the culture, though not by the courts of law<sup>13</sup>. A similar, rational use of the occult by the enemy emerges in the case of a Tuvan woman who consulted the Headman after she lost her job and her partner and fell seriously ill. She accused her ex-employer (whom she presented as a middle-aged, unmarried female tyrant, full of hate and envy for all the female employees in her office) of 'working' against her with the aid of an Armenian witch; the latter, as this client explained, once secretly burnt a pack of roubles, asking the employer's brother to throw the ashes in the graveyard<sup>14</sup>. The disposal of the paper-ashes to the graveyard symbolically foreshadowed the victim's death by this sorcery. From the perspective of the victim, who was a calm and sympathetic young woman who had received a medical diagnosis of infertility, all this constituted evidence of being marked for death.

In both cases, the enemies are perceived to resort to the occult as a means of transcending constraints placed on physical violence by law or by other social conventions. So it is with counter cursing, as the following case shows: an owner of a student canteen facing financial problems<sup>15</sup>, this client suspected his close friend's wife (whom he employed in his business) of practising sorcery against him. Remarkably, the ritual of 'restoring fortune' (nothing was said about cursing) was inevitably attended by the enemy also, among all the other employees present. A few weeks later, the business had improved, whereas the enemy was hospitalized with an unidentifiable illness. This reinforced the client's faith in the efficacy of the shamanic redress; an effect which, given this client's subjectively felt justifications for punishing the perpetrator (i.e. accusations of sorcery) would be unattainable through the official mechanisms of justice.

The evidence is instructive. In Tyva a social operation of occult violence, which is affecting peoples' bodies, lives and families just as any other network of violence and crime, is proliferating as a consequence of the revitalization of shamanism. In attempting to realize their murderous intentions or to resolve their problems through specialists in killing and/or healing, the clients in our sample act according to rational criteria of efficiency in relation to other redressive mechanisms available: that is, they plan their moves and search for a proficient

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<sup>12</sup> For this problem, this client had received treatment at a hospital.

<sup>13</sup> In the Russian law the occult practices examined here are not recognized as crimes.

<sup>14</sup> This case has many aspects, which require a separate analysis. Of these, the most pertinent to our discussion is this informant's claim of being forced to an inhuman working regimen. The presence of an Armenian sorcerer is not random: Armenians (called *kara sөөk*, 'black bone', in Tuvan) are believed to be experts in sorcery.

<sup>15</sup> This client was a national of a Central Asian state, formerly part of the U.S.S.R.

practitioner, once they are convinced that the desirable outcome is unrealizable by normative and pragmatic means. This rationalization of the occult in Tuva, that is, its use as an instrument for fulfilling individual motives and interests, is a crucial condition for the absence of trance from shamanic ritual; as well as for the professionalization of shamans as an unofficial judiciary for synergies of occult and real conflict which transcend the state's justice system.

It appears as though the availability of shamans in Kyzyl compels individuals to express hostile and vindictive impulses through supernatural retaliation, instead of resorting to overt violence. This is inferred from the absence of direct confrontation from the case materials of this study. To mention a few examples: a couple of Tuvan herders, whose land was violated by neighbours (during the consultation these clients complained that their cattle had been decimated due to professional cursing which these neighbours had commissioned, something that the headman confirmed by means of divination); a Russian entrepreneur, who accused his partners of embezzlement (this Russian client brought a photo showing himself in the presence of his business partners whom he wanted to punish by supernatural means); a Russian woman, whose husband had a serious traffic accident as a result of a relative's cursing; a couple of Tuvan shop owners (who complained that their business had declined due to sorcery allegedly practised by relatives). None of these individuals openly confronted their enemies or resorted to physical violence. Rather they avoided any contact with their enemies, thinking rationally according to the functional alternative of 'shamanism' which this culture offers (cf. Obeyesekere 1975). This aspect of the above data reaffirms the headman's view that his retaliations permit the canalization of tensions in ways other than 'cutting the enemy's throat', namely, physical violence.

This experience of anticipating justice and acknowledgement of the client's suffering by the supernatural agencies commanded by the shaman, immediately emerges once the client enters in the Association's 'inner sanctuary'; the main consultation room. In this room, a huge embalmed brown bear, which has been installed on a board next to the headman's lavishly adorned desk and chair, presides over an impressive assemblage of shamanic attires and drums and various ritual instruments, such as copper mirrors and various wooden figures symbolising shamanic assistant-spirits (*eeleri*, in Tuvan). Once the client's problem has been articulated in terms of curse affliction, the client receives purification with juniper incense in preparation for the shaman's operation of removing curses by laying hands on the client's body and also by supernatural appeals through performing *kamlaniye* ritual. This sequence of ritual actions – namely, divination and diagnosis, physiological manipulation of the client's body and removal of the 'curses', and finally the shaman's appeals to the spirits – is especially designed to lead the sufferer to believe in the possibility for 'magical' outcomes associated with recourse to 'shamanic solutions'.

The above psychological aspects of the consultation process remarkably appeared in the case of the Tuvan woman who accused her ex-employer of

affliction with curses (introduced earlier). This client reported that she literally ‘felt’ the transmission of the headman’s healing ‘bio-energy’ inside her body. This transmission which involved the laying of hands on the client’s belly, was intended to cure her infertility which – according to the headman’s diagnosis – had been caused by the enemy’s curses. Characteristically, the client described this healing as a painful process, with the headman explaining that this was a sign of his curing effectiveness, meaning that the ‘curses’ were leaving her body. The final act of this consultation – namely, the *kamlaniye* ritual – was an impressive performance, whose purpose was retaliation in kind. The curses would be returned to the offender, who was expected to suffer after this ritual. During this retaliatory performance, the headman called upon the ‘spirits’ (*eeleri*, in Tuvan) by means of a crescendo of invocations, which symbolically transformed this client into a supplicant requesting for the spirits’ attention to her tragedy. The headman assured the spirits that their own ‘child’ (namely, this client) was in need of their protection and that she had never done anything wrong! Thus, these consultations effect a psychological transformation by means of ritual techniques. They establish the deeper origins of misfortunes in ‘curses’ by identifiable enemies, and they transfer the client’s requests to a supernatural agency which functions parallel to courts of law and other official agencies of social order.

In the final section, I examine the meaning of justice which the shamans deliver. The latter ‘redress’ appears to be an alternative to the official justice, once we consider that both agencies essentially deal with the same problem. The latter being no other than the realisation of justice – as, for instance, the case of the Russian woman’s dispute with her ex-husband concerning the ownership of property (see above), which was processed at the parallel levels of shamanic justice and the law court. It will be remembered that this client had prosecuted her ex-husband before resorting to shamanic justice. The hypothesis holds valid that shamanism as an alternative to pragmatic means of justice and retribution provides a rational solution to complex and chronic cases of conflict, which cannot be efficiently handled by the normative mechanisms of redress.

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout this paper I advanced several propositions regarding the inter-relationship between shamanism, violence and society in Tyva. First, the finding that shamans are consulted not simply for subjective reasons (i.e. accusations of affliction with curses), but also for complaints of unlawful conduct, attributed to an enemy, is very important. It reveals that shamans may be viewed as a cultural equivalent of the justice system, by virtue of their ‘supernatural’ power (sanctioned by this culture) for redressing injustices. Second, evidence emerged in respect of the centrality of ‘shamanism’ to specific kinds of problems which compel people to resort to supernatural instead of (or parallel to) official agencies. These problems involve synergies of tensions originating both in violent or

unlawful behaviour and in suspicions of being cursed by the enemy. Simply put, this means that no reduction of tensions related to curse accusations is feasible through the official justice (where sorcery is not sanctioned by the law). The individuals, who solicit shamanic intervention in their problems, are steadfast in their desire to inflict a harsh punishment on their enemies. Moreover, most of these clients are convinced of the futility of seeking a solution to their tensions through reconciliation. Third, the conflicts documented here compel us to consider the identity of the individuals who solicit this redress.

The latter point reveals a very interesting aspect of our data: namely, not only ethnic Tuvans, but also Russians and other nationalities of Tyva resort to professional counter cursing. In doing so, these clients are not motivated by a need for spiritual worship. Instead, they labour under unbearable pressures and intend to have their enemies punished. This emerges in the case of the Russian entrepreneur above, who exacted vengeance against his business partners; to this end, he presented a photo showing one of his partners, an act which resonates with shamanic ideas of impact magically exerted from afar. This tendency of viewing the shamans not only as religious practitioners, but also as specialists in delivering justice emerges also in the case of the Tuvan woman who went to the shaman against her ex-employer: while she was an employee, she had filed a complaint for abusive behaviour to the senior administration without, however, any results; being unable to tolerate this 'anomie', she fantasized appealing to divine justice.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, these materials indicate a new departure of shamanism as a judicial redress, which transcends the limitations of the official justice system. Furthermore, the data show that several of these clients come from the urban segments of Tuva, which are exposed to post-socialist risks and uncertainties, such as the possibility of bankruptcy or the danger of losing one's job; that is, tensions which may be effectively channelled through the services of these shamans. Hence, in contexts of pervasive uncertainty and risk following the transition to a privatized economy, as in post-socialist Russia, one would expect an intensification of resorting to cultural resources for problems which transcend the state's legal capacities.

I opened this essay with a violent incident, arguing that violent and aggressive impulses may be channelled through the practices of healing and retaliation associated with shamans. In Tyva, strands of real and occult violence and transgression may overlap in the context of the counter cursing services offered by shamans. Extending our view of crime and justice beyond the state's justice system, we encounter a continuum of occult power whose ramifications are sharply felt by a considerable number of citizens in Tuva. If this is right, it follows that all the assumptions regarding crime and justice in Asiatic Russia must be revised – in light of Obeyesekere's analysis of retaliatory sorcery as a rational

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<sup>16</sup> As she expressed her fantasy for justice during one of our conversations after her treatment by the headman: "God, why did she [the employer] offend me like that? Why don't you punish this woman?" By this, she was addressing the Buddhist Goddess Guanyin, a protector of women and the vulnerable ones.

response to real offences as the ones which are documented in this paper. This is what an undocumented field of occult-mediated violence and justice in a Siberian society has revealed: namely, to govern the unexpected, as this is manifest through severe misfortunes, it is essential to conceptualise it in terms of the supernatural procedures and sanctions associated with shamans.

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