

Article

Shamans and “Dark Agencies”: War, Magical Parasitism, and Re-Enchanted Spirits in Siberia

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Abstract: Alleged practices of magical assault and vampirism are a recurrent feature of popular explanations of misfortune in Tuva, South Siberia. Based on a field study of healing practices in an “Association of Shamans”, this article analyses rituals of redressing curse afflictions in the context of Russian political domination. A central purpose of this discussion is to foreground the centrality of kinds of parasitical worship and occult threat to structures of political power in—and beyond—the territory of Tuva. Focusing on a “cursescape”, which develops from the combative practices of shamans, occult specialists, and office-holders, the article probes a repertoire of shamanic healing symbols. It is argued that healing efficacy is constructed in the process of engaging with hunting symbols and animal spirits, which appear in Indigenous Siberian cosmologies. The analysis shows that ideas of ritual risk underpin the process of symbolic resolution. Whereas shamanic practices provide refuge to spirits evicted from their natural landscapes, Tibetan Buddhism—the unifying religion of Tuva—offers an alternative path of healing the effects of the shamans’ propagation of spirits. The article highlights indigenous perceptions of a “cursed” landscape as a space where the agencies of “darkness” and their political sponsors are confronted with an emancipating religious modality emerging from local Buddhist rituals. The analysis displays the unsolved drama of itinerant spirits and shamanic ancestral souls, whose agency is revealed through successive—yet inauspicious—forms of reincarnation.

Keywords: shamanism; Tuva; Siberia; indigenous religions; magic; vampirism; political violence; ethno-national resilience; frontier regions; Russia



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1. Introduction: Tracing Inventive Spirits in Siberia

This article examines healing practices and shamanic rumors of magical assault in the Russian Republic of Tuva during an extraordinary period of sociopolitical transition. In the early 2000s, beliefs in magical aggression, evil spells, and the deadly threat of “curse” (*kargysh*) abounded in narratives of misfortune and sickness, which shamans relayed on their clients’ behalf in Tuva (Tyva)—a remote and relatively impoverished Federal subject of the Russian Federation, which borders Northwestern Mongolia. The article draws on data, which this author collected over the course of a year’s fieldwork in a “local religious organization” (*Mestnaya religioznaya organizatsiya*, Russian) founded by a group of Tuvan shamans in Kyzyl (the capital city of Tuva). The article’s case materials derive from an ethnographic study focused on exchanges of curses and similar conflicts in which ethnic Tuvans, but also Russians living in Kyzyl, were embroiled. Incidents of animosity as the ones this article discusses were condensed into rituals for alleviating and retaliating against misfortunes, which the clients attributed to curses from their enemies.

In the course of twelve months (commencing in early September 2002), this author attended consultations redressing curse afflictions and “cutting” the maleficent impact of assault sorcery or ghostly predation as a member of an Association of Shamans in Kyzyl. In his secret role as the Headman’s assistant, who was apprenticing to master techniques of shamanic drumming and summoning “spirits” (*eeleri*, Tuvan), the author witnessed

dramatic performances by shamans visualizing and grappling with (unseen) material condensations of “curses” (which are known as *doora*) inside their clients’ ailing bodies. These experiences of curing, which the shamans referred to as an efficacious transference of “bio-energy” (*bio-energiya*, Russian) derived from unique spiritual sources and burial grounds, and constituted an omnipresent challenge to this author’s assumptions but also, equally importantly, to the clients’ own assumptions and expectations of overturning their cursed lives and attracting “good fortune” (*aas kezhiik*, Tuvan) through magical charms and talismans.

A striking example of how shamans may function as focal nodes releasing “dark” agencies with unpredictable or amplifying consequences, is detailed in the following vignette. This example involves a bizarre conversation about frightening apparitions of dead persons or other-than-human spirits wandering in the darkness, either as undeparted souls lurking among the living or as lonesome spirits encountered by horsemen across the expanses of the taiga. By early June, 2003, when this conversation took place, this author had become versed in shamanic narratives of curse affliction and in frantic testimonies of lay Tuvans, who suspected their kin or co-workers of sorcery or “black magic” (*chiornaya magiya*, Russian). These informants disclosed to this author that hostile individuals employed “magicians” to extract parts of a vital “soul complex” inherent in Tuvan persons, in a deliberate attempt to undermine their well-being or even send them to the grave. This procedure of gradual collapse or dissolution of the totality of a human person, embedded in the “soul” (*sünezin*, Tuvan) as an individual’s (alienable) property, is crucial for documenting the upsurge of an operation of magical parasitism throughout the author’s fieldwork in Kyzyl.

It was during such an occasion, which involved a countercursing ritual practiced by the Headman of the Shamans’ Association, that an unknown dimension of the shamans’ impulse for engaging with uncanny “dark powers” (as well as for transferring unseen powers along threads tied to spirit-effigies) emerged. The Headman had just performed a ritual of expelling curses from a Tuvan family’s stall, where our host—a middle-aged ethnic Tuvan man—kept his livestock. This man was associated with the Headman through a long-standing friendship. The latter situation provided an extremely valuable field setting, which enabled this author to establish rapport and, thus, extend his inquiry into a wider sociological context, which legitimizes and validates the shamans’ political solutions. In a realm of consensus about the roots of this affliction, the Headman and this client agreed that the immediate problem—namely, a steep decline in the numbers of livestock due to a cattle disease—originated from a plague of curses, which a rival camp of herders had contrived with “pseudo-shamanic sorcerers” in order to take hold of grazing pastures owned by this man and his family (Figure 1).

This case is exceptional for the following reason. While traveling through several villages in the southern part of Tuva, the author encountered a local shaman (whom the Headman had previously identified as a sorcerer hired by this Tuvan herder’s enemies). Considering this opportunity, the author unhesitatingly probed the circumstances of this shaman’s (alleged) involvement in this incident of cursing. In a way that possibly jeopardized his own fieldwork, this author mentioned to his shaman-host that he had attended a ritual in which another shaman (the Headman) had implicated him in an alleged assault with curses against a herder and his property. Yet the shaman-host gently dismissed these allegations. Looking perfectly prepared and undisturbed, he expounded on the “mystery” (*tainstvo*, Russian) of his vocation as a virtuoso of shamanic drumming. The scenery, where this recognizably Siberian folkloric image of the shamanistic rite was enacted (see Novik 1984; also, Siikala 1978; Funk 1997), involved the immense snowscapes of the village of Erzin and its outlying areas, which form part of Erzinskii “*kozhuun*” (administrative “district”, Tuvan) near the Tuvan-Mongolian border (Figure 2).



Figure 1. A herders' camp, consisting of two yurts (the abodes of two ethnic Tuvan families having common descent) and a wooden corral used for enclosing their livestock. This site was located on the slopes of a mountain range approximately two hours away from the township of Ak-Dovurak in the west Tuvan basin (a small town that is synonymous with its local asbestos mining plant).

In late February 2003, only a few days after the author left Erzin and its cross-border trading post and returned to Kyzyl with a Tuvan friend (who owned a car imported from Japan through the city of Vladivostok in the Russian Far East), the effects of this inter-regional shamanic combat sharply emerged. Upon visiting a senior Tuvan ethnographer at an academic institute in Kyzyl, the author (who felt emboldened by his fortuitous discovery of traces of an inter-shamanic rivalry brewing in the background) was advised to avoid probing politically dangerous fields (and, in suggesting this, the senior scholar perhaps overlooked the fact that any interaction with shamans as research subjects or informants could be as dangerous as a damaged and unsightly electrical cable one can barely notice). However, the senior scholar quite reasonably inferred that the author's penchant for ethnographic boldness and unexpected twists could backfire, causing the escalation of feuds between shamanic factions. The latter outcome could have led to unpleasant legal ramifications if in the interim the author had not carefully re-evaluated his perilous ethnographic forays into a contested field of supernatural activity.

Following an upsurge of social tensions fueled by tales and rumors of shamanic and political conspiracies, the above report on a "sudden" rise of a dark cloud of curses from this herder's camp and yurt—a mass curse infection, which the Headman described with another native term, "*chatká*", as a metaphor for extreme occult threats—introduces the central analytic of this article. The centerpiece of this contest between shamans and parasitical politico-religious practitioners involves secret techniques of tracing sources of "dark energies" and merging them with autonomous "soul parts" harvested from dead persons. This imaginative interplay between unnatural sources of power and shamanic rituals is revealed in the following dialogue between the Headman and this author—an

occurrence that reveals a new aspect of the “transformational” pattern of shamanism, which Caroline Humphrey has identified as a recurrent form of embodying “energies” immanent in nature and substituting one energy for another in Mongol and northern Manchurian shamanic practices in the past (Humphrey 1996, p. 199).



Figure 2. A snapshot of the white nightfall during a stroll around the empty (yet really safe) streets of Erzin village. The right side of this long road was interspersed with wooden houses, separated from each other by small fences, like the “house” (*bazhyŋ*; Tuvan), owned by the shaman who hosted this author one evening in February 2003. The term “*bazhyŋ*” (pronounced with a nasal -n-) denotes both a “house”, involving a family compound (*dom*, Russian) and an apartment (*kvartira*, Russian). The latter is typical of Soviet-era residential units in Kyzyl, as well as in other towns of Tuva (and broadly in Russia). During his fieldwork in Kyzyl, this author lived in a rental apartment in an outlying residential area known as *Angarskii Bul’var* (nearly a five minute driving distance from the central square of Kyzyl, a town of approximately 115,000 residents).

A similar picture of shamanic ritual as reinventing an outward natural terrain of transformative possibilities is revealed from a tale about a mysterious copper mirror, which the Headman relayed to this author. According to this, unlike conventional round copper mirrors, which appear as symbolic ornaments attached to a “shaman’s cloak” (*kham ton*, Tuvan), this “mirror” is not subject to human interventions. As a “rock solid” formation of the storms breaking into the territory of Tuva in the early summer (which are known as *shuurgán*; singular), this “mirror” descends into the precipices of *Tannu-ool* Mountains in South Tuva before it embarks on an annual journey to the “upper realm” (*ustukú orán*, Tuvan). In Tuvan mythology, this realm is a level of the “world” (*delegei*) to which “white shamans” (*ak khamnár*, Tuvan; *nebesnyie shamany*, Russian) dispatch their souls in trance, in order to plead for the heavenly spirits’ vigilance during critical rituals of saving patients or clients who are in the throes of a death curse.

As the Headman, a self-designated “white shaman”, descending from a famous “black shamaness” (*kara kham*, Tuvan), claimed, this “mirror” (*küzünggü*, Tuvan), which is visiting from the sky, may optimally be harvested during the Lunar New Year (*Shagaá*, Tuvan) at the end of February, when it is “playing on the ground”. As this story (which was presented as a legend) goes on, establishing physical contact with this coveted flying object paves the way for accessing immense “energies” linking its possessor with the spirit overlord of Tuva’s pantheon, *Khayirakán*—a deity that endorses the soul of the Headman’s main shaman-ancestor (a character who is introduced below). The present analysis illuminates “dark” pathways of shamanic imagination, which are shaped by downtrodden spirits or dead (shamanic) ancestors seeking opportunities for reincarnation. On a secondary level of analysis, this article attests to the unforeseen ways through which these “dark agencies” are mobilized as hidden sources of a hegemonic ideology, associated with the combative practices of shamanic and political conspirators.

2. Theoretical Context

Documenting the resurgence of spirits and souls of the dead, this article constructs a conceptual frame, based on Tuvan beliefs about magico-religious specialists who cause people to decline by sapping them of essential sources of vitality, which constitute their “soul complex”. According to the Headman’s description of this “curse-causality”, the symptoms of soul extraction involve states of psychological disorganization and “paranoia”. Nonetheless, this state of confusion or gradual deterioration is viewed as a mechanical effect resulting from ill-intentioned practices of installing curses or evil spells and malign wishes in another person’s consciousness. This sense of alienation or dissociation from one’s own self, which results from a forceful substitution of a victim’s “soul” (or life-energy) with an invisible corrosive substance (described earlier as a “doora” curse), exemplifies a state of illness or personal decline known as “soul loss”.

The Headman described the sorcerers’ parasitical conduct of gradually deforming a victim’s consciousness by means of sensational metaphors; namely, he invoked images of projections of curses, which multiply like cells within the victim’s mind and body. Throughout this transitional period, the afflicted person is beset with bad occurrences or falls into fits of trepidation, including even momentary (but very disturbing) apparitions causing the afflicted person to flee from his or her haunted house. The agony or intensity of this state of involuntary tremor may be manifested through uncanny spirit-presences. Namely, shamans who knew about this author’s interest in spirits appearing in distorted forms and laying eyes on bewildered humans, described these incidents as the last stage of this “curse development” before the afflicted person’s “life” (*amydyrál* or *churttalgâ*) is terminated. For instance, a Tuvan woman named Khovalygmaa, who was practicing as a novitiate shaman during the author’s fieldwork, described how advanced kinds of curse affliction appeared as an “evil spirit” (*byk*, Tuvan) standing behind her clients’ shoulders.

These descriptions included images of arrows of curses, extending from multiple angles in a chaotic pattern. This shamanic imagery resembles Pedersen’s vivid analysis of how a new generation of unfulfilled shamans and laypeople in Ulaan-Uul (Northeastern Mongolia) experienced the deepening crisis of post-socialism through the unpredictable and labile forms of spirits as harbingers of an “occult excess” that dominated social life in the geopolitical fringes of the Mongolian state (Pedersen 2011, also Pedersen 2014). In a similar vein, Stelmaszyk amply documents the powerful endurance of the phenomenon of cursing among present-day citizens of Kyzyl, noting that curses are key features of an intricate network of dangerous sociality, informed by Soviet political modernization and new fears and uncertainties associated with an increased attention to shamanic practices throughout post-socialist Siberia (Stelmaszyk 2022, p. 4).

The present article probes an extraordinary range of indigenous religious responses and adaptations to Russian neo-colonial practices of mobilizing shamans and “dark agencies” for political domination. This proposition, namely, the presence of an analogy between shamanic and political procedures of governance is crucial for the purposes of this analysis. The ethnographic data will shed light on a specialist ritual concerned with protecting indigenous landscapes and their spiritual resources from extractive forays by shamans, who are purportedly functioning as purveyors of “dark agencies”, associated with the Kremlin (a point to which we will return in the Conclusions). This analysis will foreground a religious ideology that challenges key notions of the monopoly of state sovereignty as the ultimate source of power, or as a sacred canon guaranteeing the “command of the sovereign”, in modern governmental states (see Roberts [1979] 2013, for a relevant discussion). In assessing the socio-political implications of a broad field of remedial and destructive (or harmful) ritual practices, associated with popular shamans and oracles respectively, the analysis affirms a central thesis on Siberian religions as a forum for ethno-national resilience to state-sponsored Russification and coercive political integration among the Indigenous people of the Russian North (see Balzer 2021, also Balzer 1999).

In this context, the article aims to develop an analysis of shamanism as a peripheral ecological power overlapping with ethnic frontier zones, in line with Balzer’s definition

of Siberian religions as a “bulwark of potentially tenacious personal and social-cultural significance” (Balzer 1999, p. 22). In her well-known studies of ethnic identity formation in North Russia, Balzer analyzed a variety of religious adaptations and transformations that took shape in the milieu of the “Soviet (dis)Union” (Balzer 1999, p. 22). Based on long-term fieldwork among the Khanty, a traditionally nomadic society of reindeer breeders and hunters in the Northern Ob River region, Balzer highlights the interplay between Marxist-Leninist ideologies and pre-existing practices of bear ceremonialism. She argues that, rather than yielding to a materialist approach to Indigenous religions as an opiate that contributes to socioeconomic depravity, ethnic groups in this sub-Arctic area creatively merged the “sacral” doctrines of Marxism and Russian Orthodox Christianity with beliefs originating from traditional Khanty animist cosmology (Balzer 1999, p. 16 ff.).

Focusing on the interplay between long-lasting shamanic symbols and new kinds of social anxiety, this article identifies forms of shamanic power, which evolve across the geographical fringes of Tuva. A key feature of this ethnography involves an assemblage of shamanic talismans, which embody ritual memory among coercively secularized post-communist societies (see Kwon 2000, p. 36). Based on an eyewitness account of a ritual, which the Headman practiced to block an assassin’s assault with “kargysh” curses against a helpless client, the materials will highlight symbolic paths opened by these shamanic devices during the performance of *kamlaniye*. “Kamlaniye”, a Russian word signifying Siberian rituals conducted by either shamanic specialists or lay persons (see Vitebsky 2001), is synonymous with the animistic religions of the Altaians and other South Siberian (Tuva, Soyot, Karagas) horse-breeding “tribal” (clan-based) ethnic people (see Vainshtein [1972] 2009), whose sacrificial rites and veneration of a “sky god” formed the background of Eliade’s theory of a pristine residue of an “archaic” North Asian shamanism (Eliade 1964, see also Diószegi 1974, cited in Hoppál 1998).

The presence of a religious practitioner, known in Russian ethnography as *shamán* (Altai “kam”; Tuvan “kham”) is ubiquitous in these regional cultures (see Znamenski 2003), which include folkloric traditions of epic genres and “chants” (*algyshtár*, Tuvan; *algysht*, singular) for pleading with “spirits” (*eeleri*) or even uttering curses at enemies and rival shamans (Kenin-Lopsan 1995a, 1995b). All these concepts of power govern the vocation and healing specialisms of the Headman, a revivalist Tuvan shaman, whose biography of election and initiation begins with an interesting set of events evolving from the classical motif of a “bestowal” of power by the neophyte’s ancestors. In the Headman’s narrative, this motif (which features in shamanic legends ranging from Arctic Asia to Mongolia) appears as a box containing a “hidden treasure” (namely, talismans and a female effigy), which he inherited from his shaman-grandmother at the height of the Soviet anti-religious campaigns in Tuva (in the 1950s).

As we shall see, this effigy, which incorporates the rebellious identity of a long-dead shaman ancestor, functions as a catalyst of healing and retaliation during the Headman’s countercursing rituals. Bragging about his grandmother’s fearlessness, the Headman used to narrate his reminiscences of acting as an assistant of this ancestor and attending overnight *kamlaniye* rituals, during which this shamaness performed divination in a state of exaltation from chanting. These abilities caught the Party Commissars unawares and compromised their campaigns for “conquering superstitious false consciousness” through material progress (Balzer 1999, p. 21). The return of repressed shamanic spirits currently is reminiscent of heroic tales and myths about the shamanic amulets of the Orochon (Sakhalin, Eastern Siberia), which became furious after falling into the hands of Russians who installed them in a museum (Kwon 2000). Symbolizing experiences of totalitarian terror, stories about disowned and angered amulets, which take revenge on their former owners and command illness, reveal meanings of ritual memory as a form of resistance (Kwon 2000, p. 34). As Kwon argues, re-visiting the trauma of Stalinist repressions through stories about shamanic artifacts is a way to acknowledge a living “absence”; namely, an absent agency involving the repressed and “unperformed rituals” of the past (Kwon 2000, pp. 35–36; see also Højer 2009).

The ethnographic data on magical parasitism (or “soul vampirism”) and shamanic restorative practices are organized under three conceptual pillars, which underpin the structure of this essay. Emerging from a field of shadowy or illegitimate cultic practices, the data of the first part introduce a central theme of this analysis. Namely, the extension of “shamanic” rituals for cursing one’s antagonists (or avenging their misdeeds) into contexts associated with political intrigue. The present inclusion of this murky field of ritual practices into the shamans’ repertoire of remedial rituals is an analytical construct. The shamans who relayed rumors about professional magicians hired by political officeholders to dispense with their hard-working and committed assistants after an electoral campaign or to disable other candidates, sharply distinguish this type of occult malignancy from rituals for providing remedies to individuals struck with misfortunes. Crucially, to document this “dark” shamanic operation, activities of ritual parasitism, involving magical assaults, form a horizontal “cursescape”. This spatial ontological realm expands like an anarchical religious cult, which is fueled with riotous “energy sources” from graveyards and other infested areas.

Contrary to these disorderly schemes, developed by infamous cult practitioners, the data related to the second conceptual pillar reveal how shamanic healing works through transferring clients from a “cursescape” to a genealogy of ancestral souls and nature spirits. In this process, an explicit reference is made to the bear as a shamanic ancestor, whose presence symbolizes features of shamanic reciprocity (in opposition to parasitical activities of magical offenders). This dichotomy underpins the third conceptual pillar of this analysis. Based on a testimony of acts of sorcery, which allegedly took place in a public bureau and a graveyard, this exploration will establish a link between a client’s misfortunes and a long-standing agency of hauntings by spirits returning from exile. The data will identify a distinct Buddhist modality of healing landscapes, which have become the sources of an extractive spiritual industry developed by Russian government elites and their shamanic conspirators.

3. Results: Shamanism, Ghostly Predation, and the Worship of Magical Parasitism

This article’s documentation of an upsurge of “curse paranoia”, which is governed by shamans, draws on primary data collected by this author during fieldwork in Kyzyl and other towns of Tuva in the year 2003. Common to these case materials (some of which are introduced below) is an understanding of curse afflictions as repercussions of disputes and conflicts, which are subject to intervention by the justice system, as this author has shown elsewhere (Zorbas 2015, 2020, 2021). The condensation of curse accusations and ensuing hostilities within contexts associated with political intrigue and Indigenous spirituality (cf. Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2021, p. 114) is crucial for analyzing the shamanic techniques documented below. As is argued, practices of healing and countercursing are key features of a shamanic operation, which expands like a “border-crossing” phenomenon. A central finding of this study involves the interconnectedness of strands of socio-political ordering developed by shamans and political actors respectively. According to the evidence presented in the process, shamans develop novel contexts of political specialization with synergies across the state’s institutions.

The following vignette is of special relevance for analyzing contexts of hybrid political action since it offers the preamble to the main case study of this section. One of the most prized and rewarding moments of ethnographic inquiry concerned a special category of shamanic rituals for reversing curses, which were enshrouded under a veil of secrecy. Infiltrating the public system of transparency and institutional democratization in the post-socialist political milieu of Kyzyl, shamanic rituals reserved by mid-level bureaucrats and government officials exhibited the dark (shamanic) undercurrents of political development in this Siberian city. Being a vital part of an expansive trend that resonates with Obeyesekere’s groundbreaking ethnography of demonic Hindu deities rising from Sri Lanka’s pantheon and of sorcery-cutting rituals, which proliferate in the drab slums of South Asia (Obeyesekere 1975, 1977, 1981), the Headman’s vindictive rituals recapitulated through

cultic relics a heroic or redemptive path trodden by shamanic ancestors and rebellious spirits several decades ago.

As we will see, this imaginary of the “return of the repressed”, namely, a ritual modality of attributing ideology and revolutionary intentions to the “primal” ceremonial masks and symbols, is focused on the “dark powers” of the Headman’s ancestor. The latter, a Tuvan shamaness, was known as a figure of resistance and a political agitator, whose angered soul went into a flight after she was summarily executed by the Soviets in the mid-1950s. According to this account, which the Headman represented as an old legend about this ancestor’s feats, the fame of this “black shamaness” originated from her miraculous healing rituals and prophecies, which the Soviets strove to suppress. In a way reminiscent of millenarian mobilizations and various “prophetic disturbances”, which surged in Africa during the halcyon days of anti-colonial popular resistance (see [Morris 2004](#), p. 159 ff.), the shamaness *Kara-kys*¹ roamed throughout the Tuvan steppes, propagating a religious craft akin to a “cult of affliction”. The spirit, which was fueled into this cultic association founded by Kara-kys in a rural locality known as *Kara Bulung* (“The Black Corner”, Tuvan), permeated the life of Kara-kys’s brother, whose name was *Cherlik kham* (“The Mad Shaman”, Tuvan). Acknowledging mutual genealogical roots of affliction with *Albys*, a labile, shape-shifting spirit (whose appearance as a “hostess of the taiga” you may encounter while walking through the wilderness at dawn), the inspired siblings practiced *kamlaniye* rituals to release ethnic Tuvans and Russians from sickness and sufferings at the height of Soviet repression. Symbolically overshadowing the post-Soviet political establishment of Tuva, this ancestor (Kara-kys) lives within an effigy, which the Headman had placed over his desk and chair at his shamanic Association (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The shaman in action: the Headman performing a *kamlaniye* ritual for a client in the main consultation room of his Association.

The political implications of the resurgence of “dark” spirits behind shamanic revival in Kyzyl emerge in the following account relayed by the Headman. The latter, a specialist in casting out curses and similar forms of “negative (bad) energy” (*plokhaya energiya*, Russian) from patients, would often mention that a great deal of his special techniques was concerned with knowledge and “advice” (*sovet*, Russian) he offered to local political personnel at a fee. Characteristically, once, the Headman disapproved of this author’s plan to contact the office of an elected member of the Tuvan Parliament (at whose request the Headman had practiced a ritual for bolstering his political campaign). The Headman stressed that this initiative would be tantamount to a definitive end of the author’s ethnographic career in Tuva! This author took seriously his shamanic mentor’s advice to avoid pursuing contacts fraught with danger, particularly after he had several bitter experiences of dealing with bureaucratic procedures of registration required of foreign visitors to Kyzyl. Hence, with the exception of one case (a Russian client, who was a senior officer at a state administrative unit in Kyzyl), the sample of respondents did not extend to political officials or other agents of potential danger for the author’s fieldwork. Despite these limitations, the author was able to obtain valuable insights into what may be described as an “atmosphere of suspended tensions”. Thus, throughout a strenuous and emotionally intense “shamanic ordeal” of familiarizing himself with the perspective of an “insider” (Lamazhaa and Bakhtikireeva 2022), this author tested the major hypotheses of his research during tense encounters with senior members of the local academia (some of whom treated the author’s interests with suspicion or disbelief).

Nonetheless, the author was compensated with rare testimonies about secret consortiums between political actors (or their teams) and the Headman. Moreover, in one instance, the author witnessed a shaman’s divination, which dealt with a life-threatening situation concerning a close kin of a high-level Russian state administrator (who was the main client present at this consultation). Although they constituted secondary sources, primary field data of this kind added further insights into the political impact of modern shamanic retaliatory action, thereby leading to the refining of the major propositions explored in this article.

Evidence concerning the centrality of notions of political domination regulated by shamans (some of whom are associated with disreputable ritual practices) emerges from the following account, which circulated among this author’s informants. This story involves strange rumors about a ritual, during which an obscure magician died of the same curses he launched against his client’s enemies. These rumors focused on the shady dealings and inevitable death of an aficionado of “black magic”. This person had not been ordained in any shamanic “school” of Kyzyl. Nonetheless, his identity as an extra-sensory healer (*extra-sens*, Russian) was well-known among many shamans. According to these rumors, the culprit (who fell victim to his own sorcery) was a marginal figure, who propagated an egregious cult in the fringes of shamanism’s institutional settings. He was known for offering magical services in an unacknowledged (grey) zone lying beyond the domain of shamans licensed by their organizations to perform cures and conduct rituals. He was rumored to practice costly rituals for politicians and affluent citizens, as well as to charge exorbitant fees for providing his services to desperate clients struck with misfortunes related to health and family. His notoriety stemmed from his methods of sickening his victims with “evil spells” (*zaklinaniya*, Russian) and demanding a ransom to release their own or their relatives’ souls (which he had abducted). In a way that replicated pyramid schemes or protection rackets on a metaphysical level, the magician operated an inscrutable criminal business of harvesting souls from alive victims and alienating deceased persons from the scattered remnants of their souls, which linger in graveyards.

As this rumor unfolds, one night, the infamous magician was dabbling in a ritual for a client seeking to empower himself through a vampirical extraction of a victim’s soul. Nonetheless, things took an unexpected turn. It did not become possible to verify the medical diagnosis of the cause of his death. Nonetheless, the shamans, who imparted this information to the author, attributed this outcome to a combination of occult and material causes. In their view, the magician’s death resulted from a cumulative process, which

involved the appropriation of large quantities of “noxious energy” delivered from the spirit world. During his career, the magician was allegedly being supplied with these resources by noxious spirits, which inhabit graveyards and desolate places. As the managers of a repository of dead peoples’ souls, these spirits (known as *chetker* and *mangys*, both of which are singular) had granted the “soulless” magician access to a grotesque gallery of disembodied “soul parts” that survive a person posthumously. Thanks to his intimacy with these spirits, the magician was a licensed collector of soul parts, which had composed a person’s vitality in this world.

As a member of this “auction of souls” in the Tuvan “Underworld” (*Erlük Oran*), this magician had amassed a collection of soul parts, such as a person’s “breath” (*tyn*, Tuvan), which he devoured each time he conducted his deadly cursing rituals. In this way, the notorious cult specialist sponsored his professional activities and channeled his occult acquisitions into his rituals. Accordingly, his death was explained as a result of running out of “energy supplies” at a critical moment during a ritual of exalting these demons’ magnanimity as providers of souls, who made his anthropophagic feasts possible. While promoting this explanation, the above shamans identified special locations, which are rich in resources such as the “dark powers” (*karaŋ küshter*, Tuvan)² appropriated by ill-intentioned magicians. Namely, these shamans noted that the “dark powers” are condensed in graveyards, where they can be extracted by vampires—like the main character of this story—hovering around burials and preying on the residual energy of deceased persons.

Importantly, religious beliefs in occult and demonic agencies that cause illness and death are widely documented in the indigenous folklore about non-human demonic beings across the Inner Asian and Tibetan areas, as well as in the Himalayas. In his excellent ethnography of Nepal’s evocative religious landscapes, which are home to the Hyolmo people and their spirits, Davide Torri observes that in the Helambu Valley “human and non-human communities are entangled in a cosmopolitical process of reciprocity, mutuality, and conflictual relationships” (Torri 2020, p. 68 ff.). Hyolmo’s experiences of fright due to being stalked by demonic non-humans and headless ghosts in liminal social spaces, such as water mills, exemplify a cultural logic of predation and loss of a human’s life energy after encounters with spirits (Torri 2020, p. 69). Originating from the Gelukpa clerical tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (Markus 2006, p. 295; also Samuel 1993), Lamaism has long been intertwined with the shamanic spirit complex of Tuva. In his encyclopedic survey of Tuvan Lamaism at the turn of the twentieth century, Sergei Markus, a Russian writer on Tuva, mentions that shamans and lamas co-existed and performed rituals in local monasteries (which are known as *khüree* in Tuva). This form of syncretism encompassed lay peoples’ practices of worshipping figures of Buddhist deities (*burgan*, Tuvan), which were placed alongside shamanic cultic objects on the altar (*shiree*) inside the yurt (Markus 2006, p. 296).³

A historical fact, which affirms the presence of long-standing connections between Tibetan Buddhism and the “pagan” rites of Tuvan nature-worship, is offered by Marina Mongush, an authoritative source on the multi-confessional background of Tuva (Mongush 2001, 2006, 2012). She notes that Lamaism in Tuva evolved through forms distinct from those found among the Indigenous nations of Kalmykia and Buriatia—two Republics within Russia, where Buddhism is a dominant religion. A unique feature of Tuvan Buddhism in the past involved spiritual specialists whose practices crossed the divide between shamanistic and Buddhist confessions. Known as “*Burkhan-kham*”, a spiritual devotee of this kind worshipped “spirit masters” (*eezi*) inhabiting sacred cairns, *ovaa* (Mongush 2012, p. 101). Notably, the notion of being afflicted with unpropitiated spirits and demonic beings is also present in Tuvanian (Tuvan) folkloric images of Tibetan demons associated with symptoms of illnesses (e.g., epilepsy, oblivion, or emaciation), which were dealt with in healing rituals (Schwieger 2009).

Besides these anthropomorphic demons, Tuvan cosmology contains various spiritually degraded quasi-shamanic beings, who live impoverished or dysfunctional lives as a result of karmic retribution for their immoral conduct. For instance, the Headman invoked these dehumanizing features to describe one of his shamanic rivals, who had established his

own Association for shamanic practice in Kyzyl. The Headman derided this practitioner's penchant for shifting into a goblin or a dwarf and spying on his algysh chanting at the Association (a precious and enviable intellectual resource, akin to epic stories describing past feats, which is also subject to illegitimate extraction, like gold and uranium). The multiplicity of shamanic-like doppelgangers, who appear as parasitical ghosts, resonates with Alexander King's description of a non-social ethos replete with unsettling images of shamanic spirituality among the Koryak of northern Kamchatka (King 1999). As he notes, human vampires were omnipresent in this gloomy post-socialist setting of Northeastern Russia, where daily stealing or siphoning off once-public assets and meager state budgets have their equivalent in the misdeeds of the blood-sucking undead. As a refraction of moral decline, ageless shamanic vampires are feared for their ability to feed on the souls of both dead and living Koryaks. These vampires are attributed with superhuman skills of sapping peoples' "life-souls". In this way, they act similarly to local Koryak anthropophagic spirits, which destroy the dead persons' journey to the afterlife and forestall their reincarnation (King 1999; see also Vallikivi and Sidorova 2017, on reincarnation accounts among the Yukaghir of Northeast Siberia).

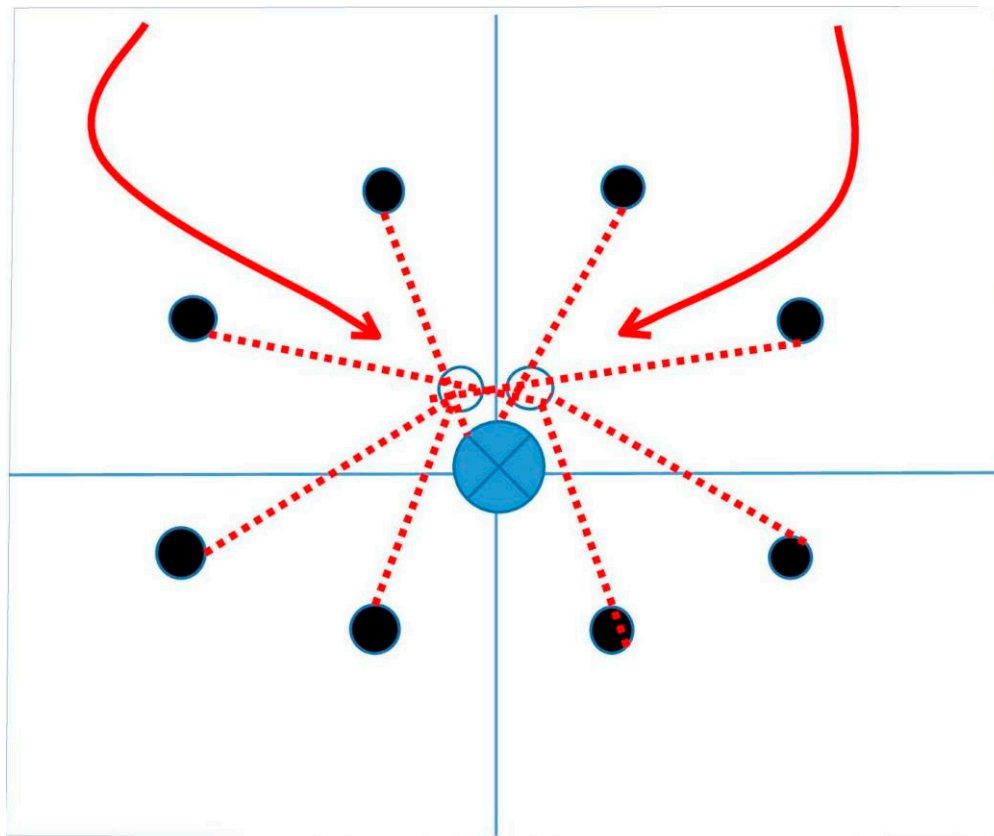
Likewise, the magician's impulse for draining the souls of the dead and channeling them into a market of "soul parts" was condemned as unethical form of shamanism. Nonetheless, the shamans who commented on this ethos of malignity, identified one more cause, which contributed to a synergy of spiritual and material sources of degradation. This factor involved the magician's costume and decorative symbols, which functioned as a magnet for occult agencies, causing its owner to become sick. The magician's death after handling the hazardous occult agencies disclosed his risky repudiation of the ethics of reciprocal exchanges inherent in shamanic sociality. As these shamans recalled, the victim owned a fearsome and uncanny ritual gown, which he wore each time he was dabbling in rituals saturated with curses and "black language" (*kara-dyl*). Symbolizing its owner as a sinister cult leader, this gown was made exclusively of black fabric, which the odd soul-snatcher had adorned with numerous pendants as the products of his craftsmanship.

Resembling late Medieval denunciations of the "magus" and his "idolatrous cults inspired by the devil" (Ginzburg [1989] 1990, p. 137), the magical robe and its weird emblems functioned as an appalling theatre of specters feeding on deceased souls captured in graveyards. Moreover, drawing on testimonies from shamans who witnessed this devotee's rituals, this urban legend had it that the bizarre cloak had become the abode of noxious incorporeal beings (*mangys*, *shulbus*) and similar folk "devils", which one day devoured their master's soul. Thus, the magus and his "theater of the offensive" (cf. Ginzburg [1989] 1990, p. 137) exemplify a religious iconoclasm, which stands in contrast to the shamans' morality cults (cf. Lewis 1971), including curse removals, which are performed for healing.

4. The Pendulum of Cursing and Healing: Parsing Cursescapes with Shamanic Symbols

In highlighting a hybrid, religious and political, sphere, which evolves around rumors and practices of magical parasitism, the magician's story reveals an occult economy of shamanic offenders, doppelgangers, and dangerous relics. This occult operation involves the practice of seizing the souls of the dead and the living in order to install them in foreign bodies and benefit their possessors. The following shamanic diagnosis of magical assault involving the extraction of the victim's soul further attests to this operative logic. In this case, which the author was able to document in the course of several days, the Headman removed curses from a woman who had gone to court to contest her ex-husband's legal claims on the ownership of a house where she was living after they divorced. Additionally, this client reported that she had been struck with grave misfortunes, which the Headman attributed to curses by various magicians whom her ex-husband had enlisted. Evidence of the latter enemy's abusive magical activities, with which the aggrieved client agreed, was procured through an unfailing divinatory method of detecting the trajectories of the curses that had crisscrossed through this client and her family members from multiple

angles (see Scheme 1). This pattern was presented to the client as a “panoramic” portrait of innumerable lineaments of cursing, which emerged as the Headman took his forty-one tiny divinatory stones and randomly dispersed them on a purple mat laid on his desk. The Headman pointed to the central axis of this complex pattern, where two white stones, standing as symbols of the client’s and her family’s purity and innocence, were encircled by a multitude of black stones. The latter stones symbolized traces of recurrent murder attempts planned by her ex-husband and perpetrated by hired vampiric killers.



Scheme 1. Author’s reconstruction of divinatory map showing a stream of curses that struck the client and her relative, killing the latter. The diagram lays out in a schematic fashion the pattern of multilateral curse affliction, as it emerged from the Headman’s divination. The invasion of curses is featured by the two curved red arrows, which represent the reflexive or spiraling motion of ballistic supernatural weapons deployed by either murderous sorcerers or specialists in intercepting curses (namely, weapons similar to “surface-to-air” missiles, in the Headman’s words; “земля-воздух”, in Russian). The red dotted lines, which extend from each of the black circles, show the path of curses cutting across the victims (the latter ones are symbolized by two white circles right above the central axis of the diagram).

The above circular pattern offered evidence of an extremely serious “kargysh curse”, which had caused these misfortunes—namely, the sudden death of a beloved relative of this client, followed by health problems this client was suffering from. As the client was trying to read this map of linear cursing, which the Headman’s path-finding (and fact-finding) divinatory technique produced, she was alarmed by the implications of this divination (evidently, a risky and exaggerated divination) of the occult threats surrounding her. On his part, the Headman explained that the enemy had mobilized a magical offensive as a drastic means for fulfilling his purpose: the sooner the victim dies of black magic, the more likely the offender will become the sole proprietor of the house he coveted. The client expressed feelings of agony about the detrimental effects of the enemy’s unabated offensive. She requested the Headman to deflect the curses on the spot. Further on, thinking about

her home's security, she arranged for a ritual of cleansing curses at her house. In this sense, the Headman's divination of curses paved the way for mutual dissociation and hostility toward the enemy in the process of constructing his performative efficacy. The Headman's imaginative construction of ritual efficacy involved a plan of manipulation based on cultivating risk and "curse anxiety" in the process of rectifying this pathological state with a shamanic repertoire of symbols.

The proceedings of this purification included standard techniques of cleansing the client's ailing body with juniper incense. During this process, the client was asked to stand upright and hold a key symbol of spiritual cleanliness; a metallic bowl, which the Headman had filled with milk. In an effort to stimulate the client's experiential responses to the invisible workings of "healing energy", the Headman described his technique as a "twofold" remedy, which, in his own words, repelled the "extended arrows" of the curses. The first fold of this healing epistemology involved the aforementioned procedure of "cleansing with juniper incense" (*artysh bile aryglar*, Tuvan), a herbal medicament whose cathartic and palliative effects the Headman regarded as indispensable for efficacious healing (Zorbas 2013). The second fold developed this healing imagery through acts, which symbolized a cosmological partition between nature's "spirited landscape" and an infectious "cursescape". The latter is a grim social world full of aggression and virulent cursing within which the citizens of Kyzyl and other Russian cities were interlinked as causal agents and victims.

During this phase of the healing process, the Headman tied a blue and a red thread to the client's left and right wrists respectively. The client was sitting on the bench with her palms stretched in a gesture signifying an act of supplication (as though she received a boon from the spirit world). At that moment, the Headman tied the edges of the two threads to a sacred "bundle" of countless threads and patches embodying a legendary and feared shamanic ancestor, namely, his shaman grandmother, Kara-kys (Figure 4). Symbolizing a bygone epoch of rebellious spirits and political trance-rituals by shamans in Soviet Tuva, this cultic item was displayed with great pride by the Headman—whose narrative of salvaging a box enclosing this relic among other receptacles of his ancestors' shamanic spirits parallels accounts of the indefatigable spirit of Russian and Siberian ethnographers, who were sent to labor camps or were executed in the 1930s, as well as the spirit of the "surviving bruised and battered" ethnographers, who outlived the Stalinist purges and the German siege of Leningrad (see Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2015, p. 443 ff.; also, Takakura 2006). As a symbol of shamanic ancestry, this effigy contains a meaning of "primalness" characteristic of artifacts in Soviet museums, which displayed the livelihood of the "self-provisioning" Siberian nationalities and their primal religious beliefs (see Anderson and Arzyutov 2016, p. 197; also, Anisimov 1958).

Next, the Headman's evocation of spirit-helpers, which animate talismans indispensable for manning an ancestor cult, triggered images of Siberians perambulating sacred sites and searching for clues of their genealogy or visiting ethnic museums at the end of Russia's Siberian frontiers. Resembling discussions between anthropologists and museum curators about the carved votive figures of the Nanai people in the Russian Far East (Bloch and Kendall 2004, pp. 108–9), the healing ritual shifted into an exposition of the Headman's artifacts and ceremonial masks. Pointing to a copper-made arrow, which had a pair of colorful "ribbons" (*chalamá*, Tuvan) tied to its edge, the Headman noted the abilities of the spirit inhabiting this "arrow" (*ydyk-ok*, Tuvan). Once the arrow spirit is awakened by the Headman's drumming and chanting (see below), it functions as a projectile, whose velocity is reminiscent of the old shamans' intercepting—through soul flight and clairvoyance—the movement of the prey in the permafrost (Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2020, pp. 31–32). The performance of *kamlaniye* reconfigures the perception of landscapes through "altered states" of pace and velocity, which extend across the space between nature's spirits and the "cursescape" in Kyzyl. In this sense, the shaman's imagery of a hunting tool, which traverses the sky and strikes the soul of a human target, displays features akin to the velocities of aviation and telecommunications, which, as Vitebsky and Alekseyev observe

for the Eveny people of Northeastern Siberia, are modern enhancements of the shaman's soul-flight (Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2020, p. 45).



Figure 4. A rare cultic object and a symbol of Northern Shamanism, this “eeren” is the abode of the Headman’s shamanic ancestral spirit. The bulk of loose threads that form the effigy’s body derives from previous rituals of “cutting” lines of cursing, which the Headman practiced for his clients.

This continuity between kinds of movement associated with hunters, animals, and shamans extends into another symbol, which stands in the center of the Headman’s “museum of spirits”. Described by the Headman as the “Bear Spirit” (*Adyg Eeren*, Tuvan), this tutelary spirit resides in the body of an embalmed brown bear, which overlooks the assemblage of talismans and shamanic attires hanging on the walls of the Headman’s inner courtroom (Figure 5). In a way that evokes his predecessors’ cults of appeasing the soul of a bear slain by hunters, the Headman honored the eeren spirit of his “bear” (*medved’*, Russian) with offerings of chunks of boiled meat from sheep (which were consumed afterward by the shamans and the ethnographer participating in this domestic ritual in the Associations’ premises). After each of these communal meals, ritual action would be resumed, this time as a collective *kamlaniye* ritual by the shamans in the courtyard, where the spirits of “heaven” (*tengger*, Tuvan) were propitiated with *algys* chants. In performing this ritual, the shamans possibly legitimized and updated a tribal cosmology of hunting rituals addressing the bear as a spirit overlord.



Figure 5. Overseeing the Headman's rituals from its altar, the consecrated bear presides over an assemblage of "pagan idols", such as frightening masks, an embalmed raven, and a skull of a predatory animal with its sharp teeth. The Headman's brown shamanic gown, which is decorated with shreds of fur and numerous paraphernalia (such as a copper mirror and several tiny bells), is hung behind his chair and desk.

This discussion shows the resilience of a pattern of hunter-prey interchange, which, as Willerslev argues, permeates the cosmology of hunting communities in Arctic Siberia (Willerslev 2007). In his discussion of the elementary forms of Yukaghir shamanism in Upper Kolyma, Sakha Republic, Willerslev observes that shamans and hunters differ from each other in terms of kinds of ritual specialization in attracting or coercing animals to offer themselves as prey. Yukaghir hunters risk incurring the wrath of the animal, which avenges the violence of human predators. Hunters in this circumpolar region cope with ontological insecurity by applying shamanic tactics of interchangeability involving objects or other persons as substitutes. Characteristically, they blame the killing of a bear on Russians or Sakha people and, thereby, avoid being "preyed upon" by the offended soul of the animal they themselves killed (Willerslev 2007, p. 128 ff.). The present data indicate a similar pattern of making a ritual reparation to the Bear Spirit, which, as mentioned, holds a superior place among the Headman's tutelary spirits (perhaps being second only to the bundle-effigy, which is incarnated by his shaman ancestor). Namely, the collective ritual following a meal, where large quantities of mutton are consumed by shamans honoring the Bear Spirit, may serve the purpose of avoiding a dangerous identification with the Bear Ancestor in a sacred symposium, where its human relatives feast on this ancestor by means of consuming a symbolic substitute (Figure 6).

In re-enacting the Bear Ancestor's perspective, the participants in this ancestor cult anticipate the consequences of their cannibalistic acts through a ritual of atonement as a "symbolic remove" (cf. Obeyesekere 1990) from a primordial stratum overlain with features of "animality". From this perspective, performing shamanic rituals with a gown on which pieces of a bear's hide are sewn (as in the Headman's coat) epitomizes basic precepts of humanity—in opposition to the unrecognizable features of the dead magician's gown as a devouring instrument (considered earlier). This contrast takes on a special meaning in light of Ingold's argument that humans are "constitutionally divided" beings, since they subscribe to moral restraints and innate (biological) conditions. According to Ingold, a key feature of modern Western rationalism involves a dichotomy between a capacity for sociality

characteristic of humans and a more generic condition of animality. As a raw state of being, animality is present in human life forms, which are thought of as having stripped themselves of essential attributes, such as moral or customary regulations (Ingold 1994, p. 21).



Figure 6. The Headman (first on the right) organizing a ceremonial procession of shamans addressing the “Bear Spirit” with prayers at the Association’s fenced courtyard. The ritual took place a few hours after a communal meal including fresh boiled meat from a sheep slaughtered for this occasion. As was customary, large-scale rituals of ancestral (or spirit) worship were being officiated by the Headman either at his Association’s site or in “sacred places” (*sviashchennyye mesta*, Russian) in the taiga. Often times, an “audience” of pilgrims, the majority of them being relatives of the shamans, was present at these rituals—including even occasional foreign visitors and neo-shamanic pilgrims as an index of a cosmopolitan landscape, where digital cameras and recorders became indispensable “shamanic tools”. Hence, the boundary between “shamanic performance” as a venue for sensationalism and “ritual” as an act of a real devotional “call” was not always as clear-cut as traditionalists or die-hard cultural conservatives would prefer this to be.

There is evidence to support this indigenous perception of the Headman’s bear feast as a symbolic boundary between human sociality and anthropophagy (a boundary which the dark magician fatally trespassed as a result of performing with his “self-devouring gown”). A similar pattern of ascribing human values or attributes to a species that is intimately related to its human owners, emerges from scholarly studies of Inner Asian pastoralism. As Victoria Soyán Peemot shows in her studies of horse husbandry in Tes-Khem, South Tyva (Tuva), equines are distinguished from other domesticated animals that comprise each herder’s socio-economic unit (known as *aal*). In a way that resembles notions of the bear as a special guest, the Tyvan herders regard their horses as more-than-human persons whose distinct lineages evolve parallel to their human owners’ lineages (Soyán Peemot 2024). Moreover, in the “sentient landscapes” of the boreal forests of Tangdy-Uula Mountains of South Tyva, equines hold a special status as “livestock of the land” (or wilderness) and as mediators between humans and the spirit-master (*eezi*) of these places (Soyán Peemot 2019, p. 56 ff.).

“Natural Symbols” and the Performance of Shamanic Healing

The above account of a synergy of healing symbols evolving from the Headman’s (expertly calculated) alarming divination of occult violence leads to an important implication about therapeutic efficacy. According to this, the healing process takes the form of parsing an extended shamanic topography into a pair of opposite moral systems, which are symbolized by a horizontal and a vertical axis respectively (cf. Delaplace 2020). These conceptual pillars uphold a metaphysical geography, which divides the world into a horizontal spatial context infested with curses; and, on the other hand, a vertical genealogy of shamanic spirits, which reside in the Headman’s ritual paraphernalia.

The shamanic “journey” and the quest for a remedy are contingent on effectively invoking the sacred genealogy of shamanic specters. The latter engagement with a vertical line of ancestors and spirits—an arduous and unknowable path, as it will emerge below—symbolizes the client’s redemption from a plague of curses roaming in the crime-ridden capital city of Kyzyl. This imagery of shamanic healing as a pendulum swinging between a (spatial) cursescap and a field of “natural healing symbols” is manifested in the final part of the Headman’s ritual for the cursed client. Soon after the client was linked to the Headman’s effigy through a pair of red and blue threads (as described above), the Headman cut each of these threads with scissors. This “cutting rite” signaled the outflow of curses to the effigy bundle (which functions as a collector of curses from hundreds of clients treated by the Headman).

The final part of this healing involved the Headman’s *kamlaniye* ritual as a passage to a vertical cosmology of spirits and ancestors, who function as arbiters of justice and redress wrongs. During this performance, the burnt juniper incense emitted a soothing vapor that filled the inner courtroom. Along with the bowl filled with ritually blessed milk, which the client was given to hold at the onset of this ritual, the juniper incense materialized the “natural elements” sweeping the curses away. These “natural symbols” set the ground for establishing a polarity between pure landscapes and a ritually unclean “energy field” that radiates throughout Kyzyl (like a “cross-cutting curse” lying in ambush at a road junction).

This contrast and its symbolization involved illocutionary acts of calling upon the “spirits of the taiga” (*tandy synnar eeleri*) and the “spirits of rivers and waters” (*khemner suglar eeleri*). While chanting his *algysh* to these spirits and summoning them to defend the client, the Headman unleashed an impressive crescendo of drum beats, which intensified the tempo of his performance. The final part of this ritual involved a “demonstration of competence” by the master of *kamlaniye*. As the sound of his drum vibrated throughout the interior spaces, the Headman kept rolling around himself in a way imitating the “whirlwind” (*kazyrgy*) and dispersing the curses. The spirits had been informed of the client’s request for justice and health, which the shaman conveyed through indignant pleas for attention to the woman’s circumstances during his *algysh* chanting.

Looking as though he had recovered his senses after a laborious effort to grapple with the spirits and persuade them, the Headman took off his shamanic coat and sat behind his desk. He announced that the spirits revealed to him the chronicle of the enemy’s mobilizing magicians to curse the client. As the sequence of deadly metaphysical events was unfolding before his eyes whilst performing *kamlaniye*, he “saw” the client’s ex-husband launch a curse assault against the client’s relative. In elaborating on his divination of magicians being hired to kill, the Headman enhanced the efficacy of his performance by jeopardizing his ritual status during a consultation with uncertain outcomes. This device of performative efficacy involved a risky divination, which revealed the course of events leading to the death of the client’s relative from the perspective of a vampire.

The vampire’s perspective involved the presence of a kin-based homology between the victim and himself. The Headman asserted that the enemy, by virtue of his rapport with magicians in a Russian town of Krasnoyarsk Region (located north of Tuva Republic), had developed a propensity for feasting parasitically on his relatives’ vitality. As he added, the aging enemy-vampire extracted the soul of his young relative with support from his conspirators. The perpetrator inserted the soul in his own body in order to acquire the victim’s sexual potency and use his “vitality” to the satisfaction of a woman much younger than him, with whom he was carrying on. Thus, being compelled by a cannibalistic impulse, the enemy had devoured the soul of his young relative.

Remarkably, this exaggerated (and, potentially, insensitive or explosive) divination, involving shamanic visions of soul extraction, intensified the client’s resentment and vengefulness (rather than provoking anxiety or even fatalistic thoughts). The shaman’s articulation of a magical plot as a ramification of tensions between ex-spouses suggests that risk and imagination are inextricably linked to power and ritual efficacy. Efficacy in the context of performing a “cure” (*emneer*, Tuvan) involves an intuitive skill for pulling

strands of paranoia from a client's narrative, as the Headman's following explanation reveals: "Each time I divine for a client, I do not look at the stones in front of me; I look into the client's eyes (even as the latter is gazing at the stones) and I see the events of cursing, as they are reflected on the client's eyes". This shows that the cultivation of risk and occult danger as "powerful strategic resources" sets in motion an ontological realm, which harmonizes socio-political contexts rife with tensions—a point which Kari Telle has developed in her discussion of Hindu Balinese rituals in Lombok (Telle 2016, p. 427). The materials following will set the stage for an unforeseen permutation of shamanic rituals into a context of reshaping a world of incommensurate value systems, namely, a "cursescape" and a natural landscape of healing spirits.

5. Case Materials from a Shaman's Inner Courtroom: The Propagation of Healing and Supernatural Justice

Viewed in light of an Indigenous cosmology, which traverses landscapes across Tuva and Mongolia, cases of magical parasitism, ritual offenses by living parasites, and vindictive impulses of dead shamanic ancestors weave an unsettling new portrayal of classical (kin and ancestor based) shamanic religion. A striking picture of the socio-political field emerges, according to which the shamans' rituals have turned into strange attractors for afflicted or repressed ancestral souls and nature spirits in search of a "sanctuary" or refuge. These downtrodden spirits take on various (unpredictable) appearances through successive reincarnations even as they encounter past and present human communities, as the following sets of interlinked narratives reveal.

One of those few clients, whose narrative of suffering and healing contributed to the author's appreciation of a cursescape in Kyzyl, shared her experiences of spirit-human encounters in the vicinity of a village where she lived until her adolescence. These ghostly stories were narrated as an extension of this informant's extraordinary experiences of "darkness and light", leading to her transformation and spiritual renewal as an effect of the Headman's ritual of summoning the spirits of this client's birthplace. A summary of this client's chronicle of curse affliction and responses to several episodes of occult violence, which were allegedly orchestrated by her antagonists, is necessary at this point. The main event, which led this client to interpret a spate of curse-inflicted misfortunes as a permutation of a tenacious "dark agency" haunting her, was an unfulfilled romantic relationship in the village where she grew up. In early March 2003, Arzhaana, a single and childless woman (aged 32 at that time) came to the Association seeking a consultation in the Headman's courtroom (where this author first met her). Prior to this treatment, this client had received a medical diagnosis of infertility and had been hospitalized in the intervals of long periods of suffering from an illness, which the doctors diagnosed as an "inflammation" (*vospaleniye*, Russian) in her uterus.

This problem, which the Headman diagnosed as a "chronic illness" (*khoochuraan aaryg*, Tuvan), formed the basis of successive curing sessions involving the physical and "psychological manipulation" of the ailing woman's reproductive organs (cf. Levi-Strauss 1963). Accompanied by Khovalygmaa (a female shaman mentioned earlier), who depicted her ecstatic visions of bio-energy through flashing drawings on plain paper in front of her, the Headman established "evidence" of the calamitous impact of curses during his *kamlaniye*. Whilst Khovalygmaa's dream-like fugue had deepened and her eyes had rolled back (at a moment when she was holding a pen in her trembling hand), the Headman bombastically chanted and drummed.

During his performance, the Headman summoned supernatural retaliation by means of indignant invocations to his tutelary spirits. The target of this performance of revenge, whose effectiveness the Headman predetermined in a political oratory (involving self-praising speech), was this client's enemy. The enemy—a Tuvan woman who supervised Arzhaana at her workplace, a tax accounts bureau—was rumored to engage in "shady affairs" at her office, aided by a mysterious witch of Armenian origin, whose "method" of bewitching involved burning banknotes of rubles and disposing of the ashes in graveyards,

in order to feed the “dark” powers. Arzhaana described this period of her life as an accountant in Ak-Dovurak (a provincial town in the western part of Tuva) as a period of misery caused by a regime of tyranny, which her superior had imposed.

Her testimony contains many facts suggestive of a plan of disguised acts of sorcery. Her supervisor deceptively used various objects as devices for canalizing hostile impulses. Once, this offender’s impulse for gratifying her death wishes for Arzhaana took an almost unnoticeable appearance, since it involved acts of giving a sorcerous potion to her. In what looked like a strange synergy of encounters, the supervisor emerged from her office and approached Arzhaana’s desk, leaving a cup of black tea right next to her (an offer that was made in an unusually “polite” and subdued tone). Arzhaana was struck by this “courteous” offer and responded to her supervisor as follows: “You forgot your cup; please take it because my desk is full of papers”. Her supervisor attempted to justify this inexplicable gesture in a way that only intensified Arzhaana’s suspicions. She relayed her supervisor’s response: “Arzhaana, I have never brought you anything before”. Her fears of having been trapped in an incident of cursing took a concrete form as soon as she witnessed the following.

Shortly after Arzhaana confronted her supervisor, the Armenian witch emerged from the supervisor’s office and walked past Arzhaana’s desk, glancing at the latter with hatred. A solution to this enigma emerged a few minutes later, as the supervisor approached the employees of her bureau and, in a state of enthusiasm, announced to them that the Armenian witch had assured her that her “wishes” (*pozhelaniya*, Russian) would come true if she followed her advice. The supervisor relayed that she was asked to withdraw four thousand rubles from her bank account. The Armenian witch kept a note of one hundred rubles in compensation for her services, instructing the supervisor to rush to the nearest graveyard, in order to burn the rest of the money (namely, three thousand nine hundred rubles to be turned into ashes). The Armenian required the supervisor to give a vow, warning her that the spirits would accept only this offer of money (as a sacrifice) at the site of the graveyard and that “everything would turn out very bad for her” if she reneged on her vow! During these moments, Arzhaana was overwhelmed with ominous feelings leading her to dispel the curses contained in her supervisor’s teapot. Instead of drinking tea from her supervisor’s cup, she emptied the tea into a flowerpot, avoiding any contact with this poisonous gift.

In October 2002 (several months before her consultation at the Association), Arzhaana resigned from her position, accusing her supervisor of contemptuous conduct, yet the worst was still to come. In the town of Ak-Dovurak, where she spent two years working as an accountant, Arzhaana had an affair with a man (a teacher by profession). One day in December 2002, this man revealed to her that he had an affair with another woman who was pregnant by him, and he asked for a breakup. Arzhaana was adamant in her belief that the challenges she faced at work, as well as the subsequent failures, resulted from her supervisor’s assault with “kargysh curses”.

6. Implications: Re-Enchanting Cursescapes

It is argued that this account of curse affliction extends the interpretation of shamanic practices as a protest cult, which appeals to unacknowledged and politically repressed specters. Seen within a wider context of events unfolding backward, Arzhaana’s misfortunes are the latest chapter in a meta-historical narrative authored by avenging spirits and their politicized rituals. This link between recent misfortunes and “ancient” transgressions or faults associated with graveyards and scary shamanic locales in the countryside (see [Humphrey 1999](#)) emerges from several interlinked ethnographic vignettes. The first of them concerns a tragic event, which Arzhaana disclosed in a way affirming a “miraculous” revelation by the Headman after performing a kamlaniye ritual to cleanse her from curses. During a “trance state”, which he described as a reverse flight over a line of events from Arzhaana’s lifetime, the Headman’s vision caught several instances of an episode of cursing in the village of Khöndergei (Dzun Khemchikskii kozhuun, West Tuva), where

Arzhaana lived in her adolescence. Through an unusually opaque divination, the Headman articulated a series of blurred visions of how Arzhaana had been cursed by residents of this village. Remarkably, being motivated by the opacity of the Headman's divination, Arzhaana disclosed a tragic event, which marked the period of her life in this village.

According to her narrative, while she was living in Khöndergei, Arzhaana had a relationship, which was meant to be short-lived. Her partner, who was a young Tuvan man, wanted to marry her, but Arzhaana was reluctant to proceed to marriage. Nonetheless, this period of happiness was terminated one day, when Arzhaana's partner died after he accidentally grasped a faulty electrical cable. Following his death, Arzhaana had an encounter with his mother, who believed that her son would be alive if she had married him. Arzhaana reflected on this loss in a way that displaces human accountability for misfortune to a predetermined supernatural pattern, which resembles the Buryats' narratives of reincarnation discussed by [Humphrey \(2004\)](#). Arzhaana recalled that her partner's death was the last in a succession of deadly accidents that had taken place several years earlier in the vicinity of her village. She mentioned that the residents of this village brought a lama, who conducted a cleansing rite in order to "cut" a line of contagiousness, which was flowing into the unprotected space, as this Buddhist priest explained the purpose of this ritual. The priest drew a connection between the cases of unnatural death among young people and an unsettling phenomenon—namely, an epidemic of hauntings by frightening spirits and the wandering souls of deceased people in the same village.

Several months before these deaths started to occur, the community of Khöndergei suffered from a "plague" of spirits roaming in the village's space and its outlying areas. People would wake up terrified in the dead of night and would see a silent figure of deceased kin emerging through the darkness. Other people would be found paralyzed or unconscious after encountering an albys—namely, an uncanny spirit, which assumes deceptive anthropomorphic appearances and raises its dark hair to reveal a countenance terrifying to its beholder, who falls into shamanic fits of "insanity" (*albystai bergen*, Tuvan). The cause of the spirits' silent revolution was the paucity of rituals, which had kept the intruding "dark forces" at bay in the past. Arzhaana recalled the lama's parting words to the participants of this ritual, which he performed to sever the link between the possessing (or afflicting) spirits and this community's members: "For a long time, there were no rituals in this region, and the "dark forces" (*karaŋ küshter*) have dispersed throughout the landscape".

The priest closed his address to the residents in a pessimistic tone. The propitiatory ceremony, which he conducted, could only provide temporary solace to the disgruntled and unacknowledged dead kin and wild spirits, for the latter task would require a laborious mental effort by lamas and shamans conducting a ritual in this memorial site. To put this differently, in a concerted effort to overcome the socially divisive consequences of shamanic ritual acts upon the Tuvan landscape (cf. [Lindquist 2011](#)), this "community" of religious artisans and lay pilgrims would use the edifying ethos of Buddhism to reinstate order in the world of ancestors and spirits, and heal a land infested with curses as a result of shamanic rivalries and occult violence.

This tense or ambiguous interplay between subversive shamanic agencies and Buddhism, as a national religion promoting sociopolitical cohesiveness, resembles the phenomenon of a pandemic of shamans, which the anthropologist Ippei Shimamura has highlighted in his studies of Mongolian shamanism ([Shimamura 2014, 2017](#)). Central to this analysis of Mongolia's post-socialist transition into a market economy, which is permeated by prestige-driven competitiveness and upward social mobility, is the proliferation of shamans through rituals of initiation. In Ulaanbaatar, the upsurge of "cultish" activities is viewed as a plague of shamanic cult organizers and disciples, who propagate their "ongod" ancestral spirits, while uttering prophecies in rituals and offering guidance and succor to their kin. In a politically transformed environment, shamans of different ethnic origins rediscover their "root" (ongod) spirits. As these devotees are "claimed" by ongod spirits in possession

rituals, they overturn or fracture social norms and kin-based loyalties through inspirational practices that yield innovations (Shimamura 2017, p. 111 ff.; see also Swancutt 2012).

Thus, the reappearance of shamans in a veritable flood challenges historically entrenched perceptions of otherness and backwardness, which the ethnic majority of Khalkha Mongols have held in respect of the non-Buddhist ethnic groups of Mongolia, such as the Mongol Buryats or the Darhad and the Tsaatan (Tuvan) reindeer pastoralists in the northern fringes of the country. In this political landscape, where the visibility of religious practices reverses the earlier (socialist) dogma of disavowing religions, the Buryats' shamanic activities proliferate like a border-crossing phenomenon (Shimamura 2014, p. 33). In contrast to the rigid and spatially circumscribed forms of Buddhist rituals, the shamanic practices of the Buryats are a nomadic operation, whose cult members multiply horizontally in a "guerrilla-like" pattern (Shimamura 2014, p. 34).

Likewise, the case of a protest cult of spirits reappearing in their homeland reveals a shamanic agency that is intent on upending or disassembling a line of genealogical continuity. In this light, the Buddhist priest's public exhortation to perform a healing rite of reconnecting with the land and cleansing it from a spiritual plague can be interpreted as a reinvention of kinds of knowledge anchored in this community's past. In the above narrative, the priest promulgates a disengaged or dispassionate ritual modality as a means to stop an accelerating crisis, during which the lives of young people are overturned by shamanic spirits and dead ancestors. Importantly, the escape from this tragic impasse is envisaged as a collective ritual of healing a curse-infested land rather than as a shaman's endowment or exclusionary right to repossess spirits as a proprietor of (incorporeal) agencies. The data of this case reveal the presence of a collectivist religious modality, which is attuned to the unforeseen implications of inhabiting a landscape infested with familiar—albeit alienated and disowned—spirits living in their silent horribleness. Carrying on the allure and mystique of a secret government protocol for radioactive contamination or nuclear emergencies, this modality amplifies a sense of revitalizing and re-enchanting a landscape, which has become inert and profane due to the sordid motives of state shamans, dark magicians, and politicians colluding with each other in—and beyond—Tuva.

7. Conclusions: Shamans and the Unmaking of Boundaries

The ethnography of this article has yielded evidence of a new ethics of revival and re-enchantment, which resuscitates a dying people and their land (cf. Vitebsky 2002) and renders this land's entities—including the alienated and homeless spirits—impervious to the effects of combative (quasi-shamanic) politics across a space extending from Kyzyl to Kremlin and, even further, to Russia's militarized frontiers. The imbrication of shamans and state agents as ethnic frontiersmen, whose activities coalesce with Russia's military aggression, emerges from recent accounts about a task force of shamans loyal to the Kremlin. According to these rumors, shortly after President Putin's plan to invade Ukraine was publicized (on 22 February 2022), this task force sacrificed a live bear in the depths of the Southern Siberian taiga in order to back up and promote Putin's plans. On hearing about this sacrifice, Putin is said to have approved such initiatives from his supporters. Moreover, it was reported that the President of Russia revealed his interest in joining shamans "working" remotely for him in Siberia during a conversation with his Minister of Defense at that time, Mr. Sergei Shoigu (a politician descending from Tuva).⁴ Regardless of whether a sacrificial shamanic rite in support of Russia's assault took place or not, the circulation of reports on Putin's pledge to "unmake great America" as part of a rekindled curiosity toward Russian and Oriental mysticism (Rosenthal 1997) struck a chord with "pristine" strands of shamanic nationalism⁵ in Tuva (see also Balzer 2023, on official—Russian Orthodox and regional shamanic—reactions to an anti-authoritarian movement led by the shaman Alexander, a native activist from Sakha Republic).

This imagery about shamans, who prey on the reserves of Siberian wilderness to support Russia's war, offers an extraordinary insight in classical paradigms of Russia as an interstitial state between Europe and Asia (Humphrey 2012). As models constitutive

of Russian political geography, these paradigms challenged representations of Europe as a paragon of progress and focused on Russia's imperial landmass as an independent and self-contained civilization. This emphasis on Russia's geographical cohesiveness and continuity alongside its East European and West Siberian plains legitimized a nineteenth century manifesto, which posited that this continental space was predestined for Russian settlement (Bassin 1991, p. 11). This ideology of "manifest destiny", which constructed an "ecumene" of Russian settlers in Siberia as an organic (natural) process, underpins the imagination of Eurasian Russia's frontiers as a sacred and inviolable space in contrast to the perceived materiality-profanity of the outside world (see Humphrey 2012, p. 60).

Of special relevance for this discussion of synergies between shamanism and the federal government of Russia is Humphrey's observation that the Russian concept of Eurasia is enacted by diverse socio-political constituencies relating to frontier zones. As Humphrey notes, the image of Eurasia as an "autarchic spiritual bulwark" between East and West is embodied in hybrid formations of power extending across Russia's border with China. Socio-political constituencies, ranging from military and security apparatuses to activist groups of non-Russian nationalities and Cossacks (mobilized as vigilantes or border guards in the turbulent 1990s and later) have coalesced into a zone of purity and spiritual defense against the wild terrains of the "other". This purifying essence of marking the borders is manifested in the Cossacks' pilgrimages and rituals of rejuvenation, through which they reaffirm their loyalty to their forebears' Orthodox heritage as Russia's national subjects (Humphrey 2012, p. 65 ff.).

What the above rumors about hyper-loyal shamans and governmental elites seem to suggest is a particular Russian political idea of the repressed shamans' rebel cults in the 1940s and their transformation into a post-colonial outpost of a militarized state. Crucially, this state apparatus mimics the deceptive rituals of magical conspirators through strategies of rendering political assault and war crimes into a justified mandate, glossed as "lawfare" for unmaking a slanted world order and its global imbalances (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2016, p. 30 ff.). As the Comaroffs have stated, this is a characteristic of contemporary state sovereignty that involves a fetishism for embracing policing and the law as a celebrated spectacle. The purpose of this "celebration" of public enforcement is a concealed operation of setting the divide between rights-bearing citizens and sinister strangers, who are categorized as a problem of lawlessness. In this context, the dispersal of the state's monopoly as a guarantor of security has given rise to a number of striking "permutations of order" (see Kirsch and Turner 2009). The proliferation of the state's ideology as a guarantor of security through various operations, such as "self-securitizing religious and ethnic communities" (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2016, p. 37), is revealing for this analysis of how shamans draw metaphysical strands from the apparatus of a criminal neo-colonial state. Focusing on tales of deadly cursing and ghostly predation, as well as on rituals of re-enchanting cursescares in Tuva, this article has highlighted pathways of shamanic imagination as these extend into international zones of combat.

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Notes

- ¹ A common female Tuvan name, which is translated as “Black Girl”. Nonetheless, as a precious testimony to a profound or esoteric meaning associated with this ancestor’s mythical abilities for cursing her political persecutors to the death, the Headman ingeniously coined the following explanation fitting this ancestor’s biography. According to this, her name could also be translated as the “Revengeful Girl”, since “Kara” means “punishment” in Russian. Viewed as a set of intertwined linguistic symbols, the versions of Tuvan and Russian “Kara” take on connotations of dark revenge associated with the soul of a venerable shamanic ancestor.
- ² The last letter of the word *karay* (n) is pronounced as a nasal final. Both of these words are stressed in the final syllable.
- ³ A variant form of the term “burkan”, relating to communicable diseases, appears in Shirokogoroff’s magnum opus on shamanism among the Tungus pastoralists of Eastern Siberia and Manchuria. Among several of these ethnic groups, the term “burkan” denoted a class of diseases (e.g., influenza), which, nonetheless, were attributed to pathological causes rather than to affliction with spirits (Shirokogoroff 1935, p. 97).
- ⁴ Sources: “Putin news: Russian ‘Shamans’ call on ‘earth’s spirits’ to aid war in Ukraine”, [Express.co.uk](https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1488888/putin-shamans-ukraine), retrieved on 30 May 2024. “Sacrificing Art for War: The Handover of Russia’s Trinity Icon”—Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center (carnegieendowment.org), retrieved on 10 June 2024.
- ⁵ Source: “They’re mostly after loans’: Tuvans, trying to scramble out of poverty, are dying in a foreign war”—Meduza—The Real Russia. Today. Available online <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/09/15/they-re-mostly-after-loans> (accessed on 25 August 2024).

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