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Shamans and the Global Pandemic of Retribution amidst Russia's "Rogue Nation" -
Tuva (Siberia)

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Short abstract

Drawing on a case-study of shamanic remedies against curse afflictions in the Russian Republic of Tuva, this paper contributes a Siberian example of anxiety and violence to anthropological research on conspiracy as the centerpiece of a globally prevalent "retributive logic".

Keywords: "curse-scape", shamanism, personality-abduction, retributive logic, violence, global pandemic, Siberia.

Part I. Post-socialist "Curse-Scapes" and Shamanic Ontologies of Abduction

It is my intention in this paper to unravel several threads of an epidemic of suspicions and accusations related to curse-affliction and various "occult threats" in a Siberian society which I studied a long time ago. Accordingly, I wish to address some methodological implications related to pursuing fieldwork in social contexts which are tinged with precarity (financial or otherwise), as well as with urban accounts and suspicions of "power revealed and concealed". I will document cases involving: magical assault and abduction, unlawful seizure of private property and intimidation by one's seniors or employers, alleged sexual violence and extraction - yet violence and unlawfulness of a kind which is undetectable by the police and forensic experts. Furthermore, in this paper I intend to interrogate notions of ethnographic knowledge as reflective of a concrete reality, and, to this purpose, I wish to draw inspiration from a book which relativizes rationalist dichotomies - dichotomies which underpin and sustain the state's sovereignty and its exclusive rights to juridical power - as, for instance, the rationalist distinction between African diviners or shamans and "modern" detectives or agents (like Sherlock Holmes and Commander James Bond). Referring

to urban legends about the revolutionary re-appearance of the Devil in post-colonial South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff - authors of "The Truth about Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order" (2016) - identify the centerpiece of the so-called Brave Neo-World in the disorderly post-colony: namely, the fetishization of law and order. As they show, this recent fetishism with law in South Africa manifests through a popular fascination with investigative units for combating high-level financial and government fraud; that is, intelligence agencies which combine investigative and prosecutorial functions, just as they employ occult traditional wisdom for divination and crime-detection. It would seem as though, in making allowances for opaque big-government and for alleged conspiracies within it, modern states - inasmuch as they are obsessed with legality and its enemies, with transparency and conspiracy - are falling into a state which the Comaroffs describe as a "Hobbesian combat zone".

It is such a case of surreal policing conducted by shamans "marching" along an ontological "minefield of ambiguities" (to use a phrase by Peter Geschiere, referring to *djambe*, witchcraft, as an ethically ambiguous power in Cameroon) which I want to highlight for Tuva Republic also. Located in south Siberia, Tuva (formerly known as *Tannu-Tyva*) numbers approximately 300,000 inhabitants, the majority being ethnic Tuvans (Mongols). In Tuva the major religions are Buddhism and Shamanism, which (along with the Russian Orthodox Church) are accorded constitutional protection as the officially recognized "traditional confessions" of the Republic (Lindquist 2011). Russians, most of them living in Kyzyl, form the second largest ethnic group in Tuva. Nonetheless, this paper suggests that the official picture of religious affiliation based on ethnicity might be misleading or one-sided in light of the data on counter-sorcery consultations below. The data will show that shamans provide an alternative "judicial redress" for complex synergies of (pragmatic and occult) violence, which both ethnic Tuvans and Russians suffer from. Recall this paper's purpose, which is to relativize distinctions between the agencies of law enforcement and the unsanctioned forum of shamanic justice documented here.

My fieldwork in Tuva, which lasted for twelve months, began approximately one year after the terrorist attack on the world trade center (9/11; as we will see, this event informs a shaman's retributive logic associated with "countercursing"). I was based in

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an Association of Shamans (a religious organization offering healing and ceremonial services), where I observed several intriguing cases as this one, which concerns a Russian woman. This woman had been involved in a legal dispute against her ex-husband, the cause being the latter's decision to sell a house which they co-owned. Remarkably, this case offers cultural evidence of a kind of "personality-abduction" (or of an extractive intention) - a "crime" which eludes conventional forensic means of detection (such as the use of fingerprints or DNA technology). In this case, as the shaman's diagnostic (divinatory) tools revealed, this "soul abduction", which was allegedly perpetrated by the enemy, had deadly consequences. It killed a close relative of this Russian woman (who was overcome with grief during the ritual proceedings). The shaman interpreted the invisible "inanimate debris" left behind by the "random" trajectories of his oracular stones (a complex process of deciphering!); and he inferred that it was the ex-husband who had killed this woman's close relative in revenge. Namely, the enemy had hired sorcerers in order to harvest the young victim's "soul" (*sune* in Tuvan) and thus to renew his own sexual desire for his mistress (the latter was the cause of this client's divorce and of the ensuing conflict with her ex-husband). The shaman vowed to counter-curse his client's enemy in a ritual for removing curses, which took place in this client's house in the next day.

This case raises some crucial implications about popular fetishism with law, order and retribution in societies where ideas on unfathomable synergies of "occult crimes" proliferate. The data on "shamanic revival" shed light on the edges of legality in Tuva, both literally and metaphysically. They reveal the "securitization" of religious experts as divine or inspired super-cops whose rituals bear relevance to modern law and to sacred or indigenous shamanic wisdom alike. I argue that revivalist shamans may be seen as reinventing widespread expectations of a transcendental justice system - perhaps in ways parallel to the iconic fiction-image of Justice Minister, Judge Dredd (!) More evidence of this "global interconnectivity" coming below.

Part II. Curse-scapes as the Epicenter of a Pandemic of Retributive Logic

Of course, the preceding “facts” about sorcery or conspiracies and moral panics have been widely documented by anthropologists. For instance, with the publication of “Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order” (West and Sanders 2003) evidence emerged of how occult cosmologies shape styles of thinking among social segments of anxious Americans, as well as how events such as the declaration of a New World Order by George Bush or the global cataclysm of the 11th of September 2001 fuelled “millenarian movements and right-wing militias alike” (2003: 3). Moreover, in documenting the tenacity of exotic occult cosmologies (witchcraft beliefs) or the popularity of unprovable conspiracy-theories, these authors engage Appadurai’s notion of ideoscapes - that is, assemblages of ideas which travel throughout the globe. The relevance of this perspective to the shamanic complex, which involves a pervasive “curse-scape” in Kyzyl (the capital city of Tuva), emerges in the following explanation of the invisible roots of the “doomed day”.

“Did you see these airplanes which crashed on the Twin Towers? It was the apocalypse of an earlier curse. Namely, when the United States led the Gulf War (under George Bush the senior), a mullah cursed the U.S. from his mosque in Baghdad. In highjacking these airplanes, these terrorists were actually repeating this former curse”.

This “secret” cause was confided to me by the above-mentioned shaman, who was a virtuoso of the retaliatory arts and who, interestingly, had inherited a special form of the much-cited “shamanic gift”, the initiation and abilities experienced by the successor. Namely, a “gift” from his ancestors, consisting in old accounts of tribal Tuvan shamans who cursed the Soviet commissars to the death. Although it is an individual theory of affliction, the above explanation condenses a wider (retributive) logic, which centers on the “occulting” of incidents of violence - as the following case suggests. This case concerns the unravelling of an incident of attempted murder by sorcery, which allegedly took place in a government bureau in a town of Tuva. The victim of this plot, which involved a real potion of sorcery, was an ethnic Tuvan woman, who had become a magnet of curses by her (envious and hostile) female employer - also an ethnic Tuvan herself. The latter’s antipathy was channeled through an unsettling occurrence, which involved a “random” visit by an ambiguous Armenian woman (in Tuva people from

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adjacent regions, but not Tuvans themselves, are linked to sorcery!). Immediately, this woman stepped into the office of the employer, while the latter suddenly approached the intended victim and left a cup of black tea on her desk (filled with paperwork). In the consultation with the shaman, this client-victim was certain that the employer's generosity and superficial kindness concealed the latter's abysmal motives (revealed in sorcery). Suffice to mention that the victim had complained to a senior authority about the employer's intimidating behavior, yet to no avail. This convinced the victim of the state's ineptitude in dealing efficiently with actual unlawfulness, let alone its invisible metaphysical ramifications through sorcery.

To round off this discussion, which reveals a demand for specialists in occult policing in contexts governed by a "pandemic of retributive logic". The "evidence" from Tuva does not simply reveal the reinvention of pre-Soviet idioms of cursing and enmity among a grim and insecure (post-socialist) population of Siberians. The materials presented above call us to reconsider the ethnographer's role as a detective doing fieldwork "on an awkward scale" - that is, within forensic realms where shamans mete out divine justice and punish rogue citizens.

Note

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of anthropologist Garry Trompf (author of *Payback: the logic of retribution in Melanesian religions*), who proposed an analysis of shamanic retaliation as a fragment of the "global pandemic of retributive logic" (personal communication). The title of this paper is derived from his comments and reflects his above-mentioned study.

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