

Shamanic Dialogues with the Invisible Dark in Tuva, Siberia

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The Cursed Lives

By

Konstantinos Zorbas

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PREFACE

This monograph originates in my doctoral thesis, entitled “Agents of Evil: Curse Accusations and Shamanic Retaliation in post-Soviet Tuva, Siberia”. It is a unique documentation of an extraordinary transitional period in a remote region of Siberia. I embarked on this project in October 2001, as a graduate student of the Scott Polar Research Institute (Cambridge University), and completed this dissertation in March 2007. As part of this project, I spent one year in the Russian Republic of Tuva, studying narratives of illness and experiences of healing in an Association of Shamans in Kyzyl, the capital city of Tuva. The topic which I proposed to investigate, emerged in the process of writing an application for an individual research grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (to obtain funding for my fieldwork in Kyzyl).

Nonetheless, the field situation which I encountered in the first weeks of this fieldwork, led me to revise my assumptions about shamanic healing and to identify a parameter that had not been anticipated when this fieldwork was being designed (in the first year of my doctoral study at Cambridge). This parameter, namely, conflicts involving accusations of curse affliction and shamanic rituals for countercursing a client’s enemy, became a major preoccupation during my fieldwork.

The present monograph examines a special type of redressive practices, which are part of a broad repertoire of ritual services offered by the shamans of a religious organization in Kyzyl. These practices, which are concerned with curse afflictions, are different from other shamanic services in terms of the clients’ motives rather than in terms of the content of ritual performances. In other words, a common structure of ritual techniques which forms part of these shamans’ overall repertoire, is commissioned as a vehicle for the canalization of retaliatory motives (cf. Obeyesekere 1975). Elsewhere, I have examined the implications of shamanism as a grassroots operation of cultural justice. I suggested that shamans are central to an extended justice system in Kyzyl, since in their consultations they deal with complex synergies of real and occult violence (Zorbas 2015). This monograph presents documentation of the centrality of shamans to a social operation of “curse paranoia” in a Siberian city. I argue that the alleged proliferation of curse afflictions is a repercussion of social tensions, which are characteristic of Russia’s transition into capitalism in the 1990s.

Thus, within the trajectory of Siberian ethnography in the late twentieth century, this study of beliefs and practices related to shamanism reveals a vital moment in history, at a moment where (I argue) political tensions in the wider society were accompanied by an upsurge in occult aggression. My main objective in publishing this work is to offer an account of a dark and vindictive strand of shamanism in Tuva, as this phenomenon was observed by this author, at a time where there seemed to be an epidemic of suspicion and paranoid accusation. Hence, the present study offers a useful ethnographic reference for future studies of religious revival and social change in this territory of Siberia.

One reason for delaying this publication is that the case materials involve severe interpersonal conflicts (some of them having legal ramifications), which remained unsolved by the time I left Tuva. Although I had secured permission to publish these materials (using pseudonyms), I felt that plenty of time was necessary before publishing this work, and feel that now at last the whole story can be told. In the interests of historical documentation, I draw a clear line between the observed facts and my interpretations, which have been inspired by Obeyesekere’s groundbreaking studies of symbolism, unconscious motivation, and ascetic devotionalism in Sri Lanka. My writings on shamans and their curse-afflicted clients benefited greatly from this remote intellectual sponsorship, among other inspirational resources of this kind in Cambridge and beyond.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my PhD supervisor, Piers Vitebsky, whose support and comments have been instrumental in the process of revising my doctoral thesis for this publication. As a doctoral student, I was regularly attending the “Magic Circle” seminars in anthropology, which were being held at the Scott Polar Research Institute. I remember discussing my fieldwork in a lively seminar, in which I drew an analogy between shamanic retaliation and the “paranoid ethos” of Melanesia, as this ethos is revealed through witchcraft and millenarian cults; T. Schwartz (1973), R. Levy (1973) and G. Trompf (2004) are key references on the religions and psychology of Melanesian societies. The presentation of this draft led me to fulfil another objective, which I had pursued after my return from the field, while reading George Devereux

(1967) and other psychological anthropologists. Namely, the expectation for debating the relevance of the concept of “paranoia” for making sense of my informants’ narratives and suspicions of curse affliction. During these conversations, a number of students and professional anthropologists offered incisive comments on how to proceed with writing. These critiques have been crystallized in various parts of this book, where I examine the possibility that the shamans’ counteroffensive is an alternative to resorting to personal retaliation or the official agencies of law enforcement.

Regarding the concept of “paranoia” (see Humphrey 2003, Marcus 1999), the present study offers empirical evidence of how states of “trance” or mental dissociation, appearing in shamanic practices of divination, fill explanatory gaps associated with unusual and controversial synergies of “significant events”. Chapter Five offers a striking ethnographic example.

In March 2007 Carole Pegg and Galina Lindquist, two anthropologists with unequalled research experience in Tuva, Khakassia, and the Altai, offered invaluable criticisms and suggestions as examiners of my doctoral thesis. I have inserted some of their comments in the present manuscript. Carole (whom I had met in Kyzyl in the summer of 2003) stressed an aspect of my materials which I had failed to discern; namely, the reconstitution of kin-based patterns of sociality, following the revival of ceremonies for propitiating ancestral spirits (these rituals are known as *dagylga* in Tuvan). This parameter challenged my ethnographic representation of Kyzyl up till then as a society infested with curses as an index of social crisis. Galina offered perceptive comments on the meanings of healing symbols concerning Russian and indigenous ethnicities in Tuva. One of her most insightful and critical comments was about studies of “Culture and Personality”, a School that introduced methods of generalizing based on ethnographic data. Meeting Galina Lindquist in Kyzyl in the summer of 2003 was another special moment during my fieldwork. I have used Lindquist’s published work, including her article which appeared in an edited volume (2011), in my paper cited above.

Special thanks go to Victoria Soyán Peemot, a native ethnographer from Tuva (currently based at the University of Helsinki), for imparting her knowledge about expressions of the shaman’s mentally dissociative states in the Tuvan language. Victoria read the manuscript and kindly offered many comments and suggestions on Tuvan terms for “spirits” and kinds of shamanic practices, as well as on several place names that play an important role in the biographies of key informants (Glossary and List of Toponyms).

The thesis that formed the basis of this book was written in the course of one year (from March 2006 to March 2007). Almost all the writing (which had started from various drafts in 2003) was done in the Scott Polar Research Institute, which provided superb research facilities and resources. I thank the administrative and Library staff for their support and cooperation (especially Isabella Warren, the former Russian bibliographer of the Library). The present book is substantially different from the thesis which I submitted for the doctoral degree. Nearly all the chapters have been extensively revised and fortified with unpublished ethnographic data and with a new scholarly apparatus. The book engages recent literature on sovereignty and social order, as well as several key studies by specialists in Mongolian and Inner Asian shamanism.

My fieldwork in Tuva was made possible thanks to an individual research grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I am grateful to my parents in Greece for having funded part of my fieldwork in Tuva and my graduate studies in Britain. My father, Achilles (an economist by profession), perhaps cannot empathize with my fascination for shamanism. Achilles has asked me why people keep showing faith in these customs in the wake of modernity (characteristically referring to Africa as a land of modernity). Africanists and other area specialists have raised this question too (yet they did so from a different perspective). My mother, Evangelia, has been keenly interested in exotic lands and cultures, especially in China and South Asia, in addition to her background in Greek literature. I thank both of them for their patience, great endurance, and continuing support.

Since 2012 I have been a faculty member of Shandong University, where I teach anthropology to some of the finest students in China. The Department of Anthropology, which is part of the University’s School of Philosophy and Social Development, has provided a unique forum for revisiting this Siberian ethnography and for refining some of my earlier work. Shandong University has provided ample funding and excellent resources; without this support, my current research would be impossible. I had the chance to access a field site in northeast China (Wulajie, Jilin Province), where I have carried out fieldwork with Manchu shamans since 2015.

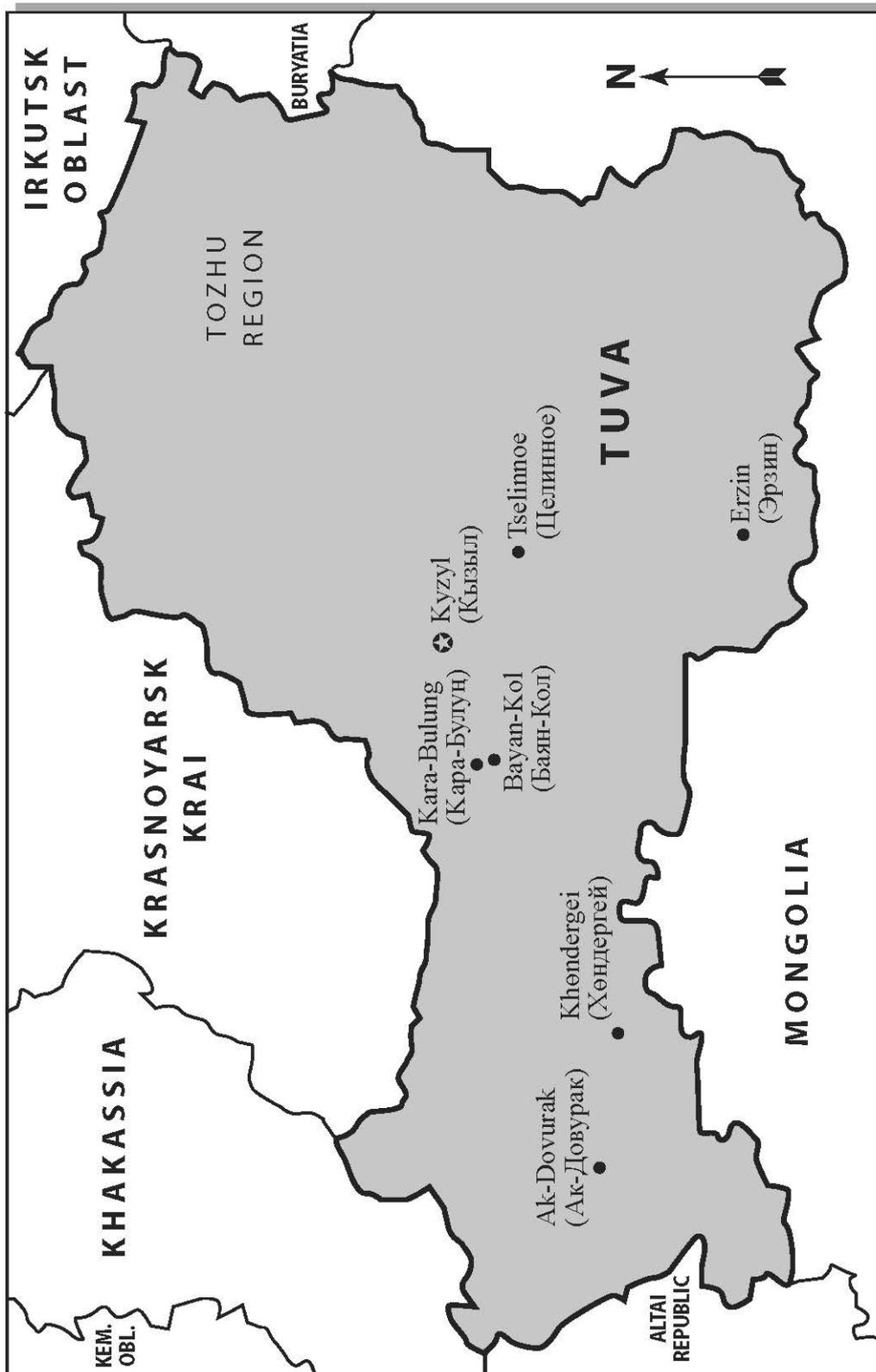
As mentioned above, my research interests in Siberian ethnography were developed in the course of my doctoral studies at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge. I should also mention that I consolidated this interest as a Master's student at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of St. Andrews (where I wrote an extensive dissertation on early ethnographic accounts of circumpolar shamanism).

My profound appreciation goes to the persons whose real names are not disclosed in this book, and especially to the individuals who were treated for curse afflictions and other illnesses. A few of them were patient enough to share their anxieties, secrets, grudges, narratives of suffering, and experiences of healing with me, as well as to search (along with me) for hidden meanings and truths in the shamanic oracles. I dedicate this book to them because without them this book would not exist.

I would like to thank the Editor of the *Journal of Anthropological Research* for granting permission to use part of the ethnographic data, originally published in my article: "The Origins and Reinvention of Shamanic Retaliation in a Siberian City (Tuva Republic, Russia)", *Journal of Anthropological Research*, (vol. 71, 2015).

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The transliteration of Tuvan terms in the text follows the “Russian-Tuvan Dictionary” (Краткий Русско-Тувинский Словарь, 1994), edited by Mongush and Khertek, Tuvan Institute of Humanitarian Research, Kyzyl [Tuvan Research Institute for Language, Literature, and History]. The Tuvan alphabet is consistent with the Russian (Cyrillic) alphabet, and it includes the following three additional letters: ң (ng), ө (ö), and ү (ü). I use the official designation of Tuva (and its adjective), referring to the Republic of Tuva (known also as Tyva) and its population of ethnic Tuvans (Tyvans).



Map of Tuva Republic (with place names that appear in the text). Map illustration by Donna Carpio.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. Introduction

This monograph examines suspicions and accusations of affliction with curses in post-Soviet Tuva (Russia). Drawing on ethnographic data on consultations between shamans and clients regarding curse-inflicted misfortunes, and on available resources about post-socialist Tuva, I argue that the data reveal a significant incidence of curse accusations as a repercussion of socioeconomic frustrations and precariousness associated with the post-socialist transition. This argument raises two implications. First, the field data suggest a shift from spirit affliction to curse affliction as an explanation of misfortunes in Tuva; accordingly, this suggests that a field of mistrust and conflict has been formed as a consequence of socioeconomic changes. Second, there may be a revival of a “traditional” element of the shamanic repertoire, namely curse affliction, through which inter-group conflict was being expressed in the past, through its adaptation to social patterns that appeared in Soviet and in post-Soviet times. People in Tuva may invoke the idiom of cursing to explain misfortunes emerging in the contexts of economic and professional actualities, such as private entrepreneurship.

I will suggest that the establishment of these actualities has led to changes at the level of personality: while overt hostility and aggression are rather absent from interpersonal conflicts, I will identify a domain of social “paranoia” involving curse accusations as a response to adaptation to these actualities. Within this operation of suspicions and accusations, the shaman functions as a regulator of “paranoia”. Focusing on selected cases of interaction between a shaman and his clients, I will show that in his attempt to control and regulate his clients’ suspicions, the shaman uses divination to develop sensitive strands from the client’s narrative of curse affliction, intensifying the client’s suspicions, in a process of reducing them through healing and retaliation against the enemy.

I will revisit these premises in Chapter Two, after I discuss some data on the consultations which I observed. I will present three of these consultations in the ethnographic body of this monograph (Chapters 3, 4, 5). Here, I will focus on another implication of my argument about a significant incidence of curse accusations in Tuva. I suggest that there may be a significant leap in the frequency of curse accusations compared to the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods, as a consequence of the precarious condition to which the majority of people in Tuva were exposed in the years after the collapse of the Soviet state. To support this, I present evidence from two sources.

The first source comes from Balgan¹, the shaman whose ritual practices I studied. Balgan claimed that a rise in curse afflictions had occurred after the early 1990s due to the difficulty of survival. Thus, this informant holds that the perceived deterioration of the standards of living results in an increase in curse afflictions. As he claimed, starvation and destitution lead Tuvans to curse their better-off relatives and friends due to envy. Consequently, these persons are met with a misfortune (e.g. money loss) and resort to him for the curses to be removed. Although I do not doubt that this explanation accurately reflects a current social concern with survival, my data—which I obtained from consultations between Balgan and curse afflicted clients—suggest that cursing due to tensions and frustrations deriving from literal starvation must be an infrequent cause of misfortune. In a classic article on methodological issues related to the study of African witchcraft, Max Marwick argues that witchcraft accusations point to particular types of strained relationships in a given society. Analyzing witchcraft in its social setting “may give a picture of social tensions very different from that derived from informants’ general statements” (1970: 286). This premise applies to the present ethnography since I did not observe a single consultation in which Balgan attributed a misfortune to an enemy’s curses due to starvation. Nevertheless, in the Table of Cases (p. 27), it will emerge that one of the motives for cursing is envy. That is, Balgan’s above statement accords with social reality in at least one sense, which concerns the perception of envy in people’s relationships.

These considerations suggest that Balgan’s theory of an increase in curse afflictions due to starvation is an

¹ Names of informants have been changed throughout this book and pseudonyms are used instead, apart from Balgan’s first name, which appears in the text and is synonymous with his shamanic ability for retaliation. The name Balgan is also a pseudonym.

exaggerated representation of socioeconomic pressures, which people in Tuva have experienced. Certainly, the fear of destitution, and perhaps even of starvation, is a reality for some Tuvans. These tensions may evoke envy of others' wealth and status and may lead to cursing. But I think that his statement is rather a rhetorical device than a representation of this society as struggling to survive; starvation was probably more widespread during the pre-Soviet years than nowadays. In other words, it is an overstatement of a real condition (yet, as I will show, it stands for a wider field of precariousness owing to the socioeconomic crisis). As it probably happens with most informants, Balgan's representation of his society is partial and biased, since it is conditioned by his inclinations and experiences (see Section 1.8.).

In a stimulating discussion of representation in ethnography, Obeyesekere points out that informants share our contentious nature as scholars: namely, informants employ personal theories or conceptions in order to understand social processes, and they engage in controversies with their fellows regarding social issues. This renders unrealistic the ethnographic representation of a unitary "native point of view" (1990: 219). My defence against the danger of ethnographic distortion resulting from founding my analysis on Balgan's theory of starvation is a holistic perspective, which is based on my data: an exposition of the range of social contexts in which curse accusations occur, according to Marwick's aforementioned argument. As an index of social tensions leading to curse accusations, the Table of Cases (p. 27) enables us to approach Balgan's "theory of starvation" as one of a number of diverse interpretations of misfortune, which he enlists for each of his clients, or as an analytical construct or "an ideal type" in Obeyesekere's terminology (1990: 220-21), which Balgan uses in the context of a description of his social reality.

The second kind of evidence to support my suggestion of a recent increase in curse accusations is derived from the literature on shamanism in Tuva. To the best of my knowledge, references to illness or misfortune caused by curse afflictions are absent from this literature. Briefly stated, the shamans of pre-Soviet times (until the early 1920s) attributed illness and misfortune mainly to soul loss or spirit intrusion (Kenin-Lopsan 1987: 28, 1999: 156; also Potapov 1969: 348; D'iakonova 1981: 163) or to the transgression of traditional norms and religious edicts, such as crossing a forbidden passage or defiling the sacred water, *arzhaan*, which is used in rituals (Kenin-Lopsan 1987: 92, 1995: 217, 1999: 163). The only references on "curses", which I found, were two stories about shamans cursing a cattle thief (Kenin-Lopsan 2002: 146-147) and a Soviet official respectively, as well as two incantations which shamans performed to afflict their shamanic rivals (Kenin-Lopsan 1995: 79-82). One could infer that this absence may be due to the failure of the above-mentioned ethnographers to record this phenomenon. Yet it is hardly believable that a novice in the field like me was able to discover in the course of only one year what the experts in Tuvan ethnography could not discern during their lengthy researches. Their informants would have mentioned this phenomenon if its incidence had been pervasive. Nonetheless, the role that spirits play in punishing human misconduct is far from obsolete. The presence of this pattern among Tuvans has been documented in Oelschläegel's study of interactions between humans and spirit masters. According to this, native informants perceive the spirit masters of the landscape as holding the power to afflict humans through dispatching evil spirits against them as a punishment for offenses and moral transgressions (2016: 121 ff.).

An important clarification must be made at this point. This suggestion concerning a rise in the incidence of curse accusations due to post-socialist pressures rests on the assumption that the cultural repertoire of cursing existed in pre-Soviet Tuva. That is, that cursing as a habit of mind in Tuvan society is not a recent consequence of socioeconomic transformation during the socialist and post-socialist periods, but it was known in pre-Soviet Tuvan societies—if not ordinarily invoked as an explanation of misfortune. This can be proved by the fact that the Tuvan language contains terminology for what in Russian is known as *proklyatiye* (curse). Thus, of the four terms corresponding to various conditions of "curse" (which Balgan will analytically present in Section 1.6.), three (and their derivatives) are documented in a "Tuvan-Russian" dictionary which I consulted (Tenisheva 1968). First, *kargysh* and the verbs related to this term, *kargaar* or *karganyr* (to curse, to swear at, to quarrel); these two verbs roughly correspond to the Russian verb *proklinat'* (to curse). Similar meanings are attributed to the verbs *kargazhyr* (to curse each other) and *kargadyr*; the latter is translated into Russian as *zastavlyat' proklinat'* (to make somebody curse) and also as *byt' proklyatym* (to be cursed). Second, *buzhar*, translated into Russian as *skvernyi* (bad), *pozornyi* (shameful) or *gnusnyi* (vile); the verbs *buzhartadyr* and *buzhartaar* are translated into Russian as *pozorit'* or *portit'* (to disgrace, to spoil) and *pozorit'sya* or *portit'sya* (passive voice). Third, *adaargal*, translated into Russian as *zavist'* (envy), and the verbs *adaargaar* (to envy), *adaargazhyr* (to envy each other) and *adaargal bile koor* (to look at somebody with envy).

There is little doubt that these words were being used in Tuva long before they entered this dictionary,

although presently it is impossible to estimate how old they are. These terms demonstrate the existence in pre-Soviet Tuva of an elaborate repertoire of concepts more or less similar to what we acknowledge as “curses”, which, as I suggest, has been revived under post-socialist pressures. In other words, this repertoire existed within the tribal units which constituted the pre-Soviet Tuvan society, although in a largely dormant state. The cases of curse accusation which have entered my sample (next chapter), are some threads of an outbreak of this old repertoire due to the severe socioeconomic pressures.

To anticipate a further objection: the experts in Soviet ethnography might argue that this scholarly tradition is concerned with the classification of data, which originate in fieldwork among indigenous Siberian people, into categorical units, such as “material culture” or “folklore” (*fol'klor*, in Russian) or “traditional beliefs” (*traditsionnyie verovaniya*, in Russian). That is, whereas early Euro-American traditions of anthropology offer detailed descriptions of aboriginal life in a single village, typically ranging from economics and social organization to religion and magic, Soviet ethnography tended to examine religious beliefs and practices dissociated from their social contexts. This means that Soviet ethnographers may well have treated native accounts of cursing as folklore: as another artefact of tradition, next to the shaman’s drum, to be recorded and classified into a repository of knowledge, such as “traditsionnyie verovaniya”. For instance, the two stories of shamanic curses (see above), which I found in a compilation entitled “*Myths of Tuvan shamans*” written by Mongush Kenin-Lopsan, a Tuvan ethnographer, were classified into such a categorical unit, “*Koren' proiskhozhdeniya shamanov*” (“Root of the origin [descent] of shamans”, in Russian). This is a context that has nothing to do with the topic of cursing; these two stories are not part of this compilation on the grounds of including information about cursing, but rather because they refer to two different categories of shamans (shamans drawing their descent from the spirit *albys*, as well as from spirits of water and earth). This means that analytic issues of importance here, such as the frequency or periodicity of curse accusations and the social contexts in which curse accusations emerge, were not part of classic ethnographic studies.

Furthermore, one could argue that there *was* cursing taking place in the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods, but the Soviet scholars of Tuvan shamanism (most of them having collected materials from elderly informants) ignored it, as they considered “curses” as an undignified and backward habit, which was unrelated to what had attracted them to research in Tuva: *Sibirskoye Shamanstvo* (Siberian Shamanism), a scholarly subject focusing on the shaman and his personality, as well as on ritual practices and attributes. An additional reason that these experts ignored the phenomenon of cursing may well have been that it reminded them of *koldovstvo* (sorcery) among traditional Russian peasants, something that could hardly be compared with the fascinating and “exotic” figure of the shaman and his ritual practice.

I believe that these potential criticisms need not undermine my suggestion that in pre-Soviet times the incidence of curse accusations was lower than it currently is. Even if the aforementioned ethnographers of Tuva had set out to study curse accusations in pre-Soviet/early Soviet times, their accounts would probably not include much more on this, because at that time curse accusations probably did not occur as frequently as they do in the present. If they did occur, we would reasonably expect that all these ethnographers would have mentioned something more about curses and curse accusations, or they would have briefly presented several cases.

I would like to relay a statement from Balgan, which supports my suggestion that curse accusations were less frequent in pre-Soviet times. Based on accounts by Tuvan elders, Balgan mentioned that in pre-Soviet times *intra*-tribal cursing was absent, whereas it occurred between different “tribes” due to conflicts over territorial control. For example, the “tribe” he descends from was involved in a conflict with the “tribe” of *Kyrgyz* (one of the oldest Turkic-speaking peoples in the Altai-Sayan region, whose distant origin is located in the Boro-Khoro mountains, a part of the Tien-Shan mountain range in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China; currently, Kyrgyz clans live in Erzin kozhuun and Ulug-Khem kozhuun of Tuva). On such occasions, the shaman of a “tribe” would return the curses to the rival “tribe” by performing a ritual. My post-fieldwork reading about the social organization of pre-Soviet Tuvans led me to consider that his information could be accurate. This is because access to hunting territories was vital for pre-Soviet Tuvans, not only for subsistence but also because as subjects of the Manchu empire they had to pay levy in the form of furs (see Vainshtein 1980: 234-38). One can imagine that under such pressures conflicts would erupt between “tribes” competing with each other for resources and that illness or inability to find game would be attributed to cursing from a rival “tribe”.

Thus, Balgan’s statement about the relative absence of *intra*-tribal cursing during the pre-Soviet period, in conjunction with the literature of pre-Soviet Tuvans, reinforces my suggestion that curse accusations within

the same group—and, more specifically, between closely connected people—occur much more frequently in post-Soviet times than they did in the past. This suggests that the context of curse accusations in post-Soviet Tuva has become fragmented and individualized: misfortune is no longer a concern shared by the members of a bounded unit, who accuse a rival unit of malevolent intentions. Instead, as it will emerge from the exposition of the data (next chapter), this concern has been diffused in the urban milieu of Kyzyl (where “tribal” descent has little importance nowadays), appearing in the contexts of interaction between professionals and colleagues or between relatives. This finding corresponds to the fact that ethnic Tuvans have undergone a shift from traditional clan society to a Russian-style pattern of society, based on nuclear family and office (bureaucratic) work.

The reader will wonder what the frequency of curse accusations was in the Soviet period. To answer this, one would have to reconstruct the periodicity of curse accusations throughout this interval, a project utterly unrealistic for a single analyst. We could reach valid conclusions only by comparing my material with information about the frequency of curse accusations in Soviet times; this is unfeasible since I do not have such information. Furthermore, this problem is confounded by the possibility that this periodicity involves many cycles, where the frequency of curse accusations fluctuates according to changing socioeconomic conditions. Ardener has made a similar suggestion in his study of the continuity of witchcraft beliefs among the Bakweri of Cameroon: a period, in which food abounds and witchcraft accusations are absent, is succeeded by a period in which the reverse holds; the latter is succeeded by a period of improvement, in the course of which beliefs in witchcraft remain quiescent (1970; also Douglas 1970: xxiv). Reconstructing the periodicity of curse accusations in Tuva can be a task for future research; I can only lay the foundations for this. Yet I shall offer a tentative suggestion: accepting that, by validating the client’s suspicions of curse affliction, shamanic divination sustains the operation of curse accusations in Tuva, it could be that the absence of shamans in the Soviet period kept the level of curse accusations relatively low. As regards the quality of life during the Soviet years, this is another challenging issue. Based on comments by several acquaintances in the field (most of them Russians), my tentative conclusion—although an oversimplifying one—supports the common (in Russia) view that there existed a sense of stability and material adequacy, which disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet state.

A final observation: the reader will have noticed that, whereas Balgan is referring to an increase in curse afflictions, I am referring to an increase in accusations of curse affliction in this work. A crucial difference exists between these two positions. The first one is a subjective condition (for us as outsiders); we cannot substantiate its occurrence in any other way except through the actor’s confession of deliberately cursing an enemy. This is rather impossible, unless exceptional conditions operate, such as what Devereux described as the shaman’s “vicarious suicide” among the Mohave Indians of California: that is, shamans with suicidal tendencies intentionally make themselves so objectionable by boasting of having bewitched their fellows that they cause themselves to be murdered (1961).

By contrast, accusations of curse affliction are objective facts. Typically, the ethnographer does not need to elicit an accusation of affliction with curses or sorcery, because it is the informants themselves who willingly provide it. This happens because, as Obeyesekere notes in respect of the high incidence of sorcery accusations in urban Sri Lanka, accusations of affliction with sorcery offer a means for expressing hostility against somebody and/or to displace responsibility for misfortune to the latter—the “scapegoat function” (1984: 108); or because these accusations offer a means for severing unwanted relationships and, thus, for coping with the guilt felt at breaking with the social virtue of neighborliness, as Macfarlane writes for a 16th-century village in Essex, England (1970: 94). I took notice of the distinction between curse affliction and accusations of curse affliction after reading Obeyesekere’s well-known article on retaliatory sorcery, where he distinguishes the “practice of sorcery” from “imputations or accusations of sorcery” with a plea for turning attention to the former, something that is a challenging but rewarding task (1975: 4; 22). Yet this distinction also appears in Kluckhohn’s classic study entitled “Navaho Witchcraft”, where he quotes that certain people were accused of witchcraft (in gossip, not publicly), and some of them were even executed, but only a few informants claimed to have observed actual witchcraft practices (1972: 58). In relation to this, Mary Douglas distinguishes between accusations and confessions of witchcraft, noting that the latter poses an analytical problem since anthropologists have assumed that witchcraft accusations are false—as the same author renders this (1970: xxxiv).

To round off my argument about social change and its impact on the cosmological system of Tuva: the field data suggest that explanations of misfortune are shifting from spirit affliction to curse affliction, the latter

allegedly being exerted by evil or envious persons under socioeconomic pressures. This means that agency for causing misfortune is being displaced from spirits to humans. Accordingly, a process of displacement of accountability for misfortune occurs: whereas a traditional explanation, such as transgression of religious edicts, places responsibility squarely on the sufferer, curse affliction displaces it to an enemy. This shift suggests that the psychological tensions of present-day Tuvans are different from their predecessors' anxieties. Whereas in the latter case anxiety emerged in the context of tense relations between humans and spirits, in the former it emerges in the context of tense or ambiguous relations between humans. This does not mean that spirit affliction is disappearing as an explanation of misfortune. As we will see, although suspicions of curse affliction appear as a crucial reason for resorting to shamanic practitioners, illnesses attributed to spirits are a regular aspect of these practitioners' daily work.

1.2. Tuva—general features and historical overview

The Republic of Tuva, a country the size of Greece (170, 500 sq. km.), is situated in the southeast Siberian border of the Russian Federation. Geographically a part of the extensive Sayan-Altai uplands, Tuva is partially separated by mountain ranges from the surrounding territories of Siberia and Mongolia. In the northwest, north, and northeast, it is separated by the Sayan Mountains from the Republic of Khakassia and the regions of Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk respectively. In the west, its border with the Republic of Altai is intercepted by the Altai Mountains. In the south, the Ridges of Tannu-Ola (Tangdy-Uula) spread across the western part of the border with Mongolia. In the northeastern region, Tuva borders the Republic of Buryatia. In the southeastern part, the administrative division of Tere-Khöl (*Tere-Khöl kozhuun*) borders Mongolia's Khövsgöl Province (*Khövsgöl aimag*). Khövsgöl is the "homeland" (*nutag*, in Mongolian) of Darhad Mongols, a region which has been described as one of the most isolated and impoverished provinces of Mongolia (Pedersen 2011: 9). Remarkably, the opinions that several Tuvan shamans expressed about their Darhad neighbors reflect a picture of Darhads as avid practitioners of shamanism, divination, and cursing, that is, a representation which is widespread (or well-known) in Mongolia. In Section 5.2., evidence of this dark representation, associated with Darhad shamans, will emerge through a shaman's testimony of how he reversed a spate of misfortunes attributed to Darhad shamans on the border between Tuva and Mongolia.

Like other Mongolian ethnic groups of Inner Asia, Tuvans traditionally derived the bulk of their subsistence from nomadic pastoralism (cattle, horses, and camels), supplemented by land cultivation in the central and western regions of the territory. The population living in the eastern taigas subsisted mainly on hunting and reindeer herding, while the people in the frontier between the steppe and the taiga lived on the breeding of cattle and horses and on hunting (see Vainshtein 1980).

According to the Republic's statistics, the population of Tuva comprised 309,700 as of early 1996. Ethnic Tuvans constitute the predominant component of the population, while the second major ethnic group is Russians² (Anaiban 1995). The majority of ethnic Tuvans reside in rural regions, as opposed to Russians who mostly reside in the capital city, Kyzyl. The official languages are Russian and Tuvan³, even though the use of the former is prevalent in the administrative section. Bilingualism (Russian-Tuvan) is prevalent among Tuvans, although Tuva has probably the highest percentage (99.2%) among all the ethnic groups of Russia who consider the native language as their mother tongue (Anaiban 1998-99: 61-62). Another form of bilingualism (Tuvan-Mongolian) occurs in the regions of Erzin and Oviur, which border with Mongolia. Buddhism (Lamaism), shamanism, and the Russian Orthodox Church are designated as "traditional confessions" which are accorded constitutional protection (Lindquist 2005: 264). These three religions correspond to the local population; Tuvans are Buddhist or shamanist and Russians are Orthodox. In her informative survey of shamanic and Lamaist practices in Tuva, Olga Khomushku, a Tuvan ethnographer, writes that the majority of Tuvans identify themselves as Lamaists, while only a fraction of Tuvans define themselves as adherents to the shamanic religion (1998: 108).

Lamaism was introduced from Mongolia after the conquest of Tuva by the Dzhungar dynasty in 1688. The

² This difference in numbers between Tuvans and Russians is probably unique throughout Siberia; Tuvans comprise the overwhelming majority of the population. Apart from Russians, small numbers of Mongols, Buryat, Altai, Chinese, and nationals of Central Asian countries live in Tuva.

³ The Tuvan language, otherwise called Urianhai or Old Uyghur, belongs to the Uyghur-Oguz division of northern "Turkic" in the Ural-Altai language family (Balzer 1998-99: 7; Anaiban 1998-99: 61; Krueger 1978). The Latin alphabet was being used for writing until 1941 when it was replaced by the Russian [Cyrillic] alphabet (Anaiban 1998-99: 61).

dissemination of Lamaism began in 1755, when Tuva was brought under the hegemony of China's Manchu empire (Zhukovskaya 2001: 48; Potapov 1964 [vol.1]: 235). The legitimization of Lamaism as the ethnic religion of Tuva was grounded on the establishment of ritual temples (*khuree*) and the teaching of the new faith to the laity, though these developments did not uproot the shamanistic religious substrate of the nation. In the early 1920s—a few years before the onset of the Soviet repression—there were 4,000 lamas and 22 khuree in Tuva (D'iakonova 2001: 54, 1996; Mongush 1984: 156, also 2001). In 1994 the “Friends of Tibet” Association was founded to foster collaboration between Tuva and Tibet on religious and cultural matters (Khomushku 1998: 112). Tuva is perhaps a unique Siberian example of peaceful co-existence between shamanism and Lamaism, something that is reflected in the local funeral rites (which are practised by either shamans or Lamaist priests).

The following offers a brief overview of Tuva's tumultuous and complex history throughout the twentieth century, the trends of which continue to influence the Republic's politics in relation to Moscow. In the late 1800s, the *Aldan-Maadyr* (“Sixty-Heroes”, in Tuvan) insurrection against the feudal regime of the *Noyan* (Manchu rulers of Tuva) had erupted (Serdobov 1985: 46), an event that enabled Russia's government to pursue its colonial interests. Czarist intervention in Tuva was legitimized on the grounds of protecting Russians from encroachments on their property. Coveted by both czarist Russia and China, in 1912 Tuva declared itself independent and addressed a plea for protection to Russia. This led to the declaration of Tuva as a protectorate under Russian Commission in 1914 (Rupen 1975: 148; Balzer 1998-99: 6; Dulov 1956: 386-87; Davletshin 1965).

However, mass agitation against Russians and Chinese, which involved the demand that they abandon the country, brought about the foundation of the Revolutionary People's Democracy of Tannu-Tuva in 1921 (Potapov [vol. 2] 1964: 79; Rupen 1975: 153). To counter aspirations of unification with Mongolia and to avert the threat of intrusion by militarist Mongols as well as by Japanese agents, in 1929 Soviet Russia instructed the Tuvan Communist Party to implement a radical program of Sovietization, which involved collectivization of subsistence economy and an all-out attack on shamanism and Lamaism. In 1944, after a native appeal to the Supreme Soviet, Tuva was incorporated in the Soviet Union as an Autonomous *Oblast'* (Region), and in 1961 it was formally recognized as an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Rupen 1965; Moskalenko 2004). In 1990 the governing party (“Popular Front”) proclaimed the autonomy of Tuva as a Republic within the Russian Federation, while the nationalist wing of the Front, called *Khostug Tyva* (“Free Tuva”), demanded secession from Russia (Balzer 1998-99: 10); nationalist claims of independence have been on the wane ever since, and currently, they are almost non-existent (Anaiban 1995, 1998-99: 74).

Like other post-socialist autonomous regions in Siberia, the Republic of Tuva has been facing severe social challenges. According to statistical data (Goskomstat Rossii 2003), living standards have deteriorated since the early 1990s⁴. The average life expectancy has been declining (60.69 years as of 1997). Alcoholism has been a major problem and a trigger for violence, while consumption of basic foodstuffs (e.g. meat) has decreased (this deficit perhaps reinforces Balgan's contention that starvation and destitution are endemic in Tuva). Low salaries impose an excessive working regimen, preventing the population from seeking medical assistance and leading to chronic problems and to disablement. The number of mental disturbances has increased, while the budget deficit of health care institutions has inflated (see Anaiban 1998-99: 24-25). Unemployment has been increasing, while industrial production has declined. Concomitant with the socioeconomic crisis is an increase in homicides and crimes, which occur even in previously trouble-free regions, while the incidence of economic crime is also high (ibid. 1998-99: 58). It is reasonable to expect that these unfavourable conditions would engender intense anxiety throughout the population, especially affecting this social segment which has dramatically felt the consequences of the post-socialist transition.

1.3. Curse accusations as an index of post-socialist crisis

Focusing on interactions between shamans and clients, the present study aims to address an important gap in the vast and multifaceted research in Siberian shamanism. At the same time as contributing to the study of post-socialism, my analysis develops a point which is the hallmark of post-socialist studies: namely, the

⁴ This gloomy picture, which emerges from Russian government statistics, might be at variance with how a significant number of citizens of Kyzyl felt about their lives during the period of my fieldwork (in 2002-03). To confound things further, in the eyes of Russians living in adjacent administrative regions (e.g. Krasnoyarsk), Tuva, a land rich in timber and natural resources, is a land of opportunity. At any rate, the above statistics undeniably bespeak a harsh downturn in the lives of many post-socialist subjects living in Tuva in the 1990s.

overwhelming sense of precariousness and mistrust of each other or the state viewed as a source of political and economic anomie, as repercussions of the downfall of socialism. My research takes this conclusion one step further, by exploring how selected individuals in Tuva make sense of and cope with their misfortunes. Though not committed to the study of post-socialist transition as such, this study engages with this process as a theoretical context in analyzing the incidence of curse accusations in Tuva.

A major proposition of this study is that curse accusations emerge because relationships are perceived as an obstacle to individual well-being. The subversive effects of social relations will emerge in several contexts related to friendship (First Case), family and kinship (Second Case), and professional interaction (Third Case). Drawing on the case materials, I will argue that interpersonal conflict emerges from a moral void, which the dismantling of the Soviet state has “bequeathed” to the post-socialist age. The “everyday moral communities” of the past, based on the perceived excellence of socialism, have been undermined and, as Chris Hann observes (2002: 10-11), they are far from being replaced by liberal economy and pluralist democracy. If socialist ideology was the means through which solidarity was sustained on the grounds that a deprived and even squalid standard of living was equivalent to a triumph and, thus, was morally superior to Western life, its renunciation has allowed the eruption of preexisting impulses to conflict—instigated by poverty or antagonism for survival. Whereas in the Soviet Union shortage was put forward as a life-style for its citizens to emulate (Humphrey 2002a: 42-43, also pp. 52-53 ff.), in the post-Soviet age this former ideal, which is divested of its purported hegemonic value, has been reduced to its materialistic meaning of miserable poverty and social disintegration.

I would suggest that in Tuva—and everywhere else in post-socialist Russia—this moral void has engendered a crisis in human relationships, and that curse accusations, which I studied, are one index of this crisis. As we will see, the fall of the Soviet state has opened opportunities for enrichment by means of new economic actualities, such as private entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, the fear of financial disaster within the market economy of Russia has produced mistrust, leading to curse accusations (First Case). Equally, privatization of property has led to familial conflicts over property rights as well as to curse accusations (Second Case). While, competitiveness for jobs within a market afflicted with unemployment has triggered the emergence of more elaborate “paranoid constructions”, for instance, the idea that the enemy has commissioned shamanic cursing and sorcery in order to take over a job belonging to someone else (Third Case).

However, if people make sense of social crisis through “repertoires of the imagination”, habits of mind, which could be categorized either as Soviet or as post-Soviet, as Humphrey writes (2002b: xxi), this is especially true for people afflicted with misfortunes in post-Soviet Tuva. My point is that ethnic Tuvans have revived a pre-Soviet local repertoire of the imagination, namely curse affliction, in order to come to terms with misfortunes that emerge in the context of post-socialism. Yet this “revival” has been adapted to patterns of social change, e.g. urbanization and the transition from clan society to a bureaucratic society, which took shape during the sovietization of Tuva⁵. The result is a fragmented and individualized pattern of curse accusations, which is consonant with the dissolution of the old clan organization and the adaptation of life into the relatively rootless urban context of Kyzyl. Socioeconomic changes that were formed during the Soviet and post-Soviet ages have been crystallized in the repertoire of curse affliction.

I introduce below the distinctive features of this new pattern of cursing. First, a transition from the natural landscape into the urban context: the curses in my sample no longer always traverse the natural space (e.g. mountains and rivers) in order to afflict the rival “tribe”, as the imagery of curse affliction had been in the pre-Soviet past; curses can now be located in spaces associated with one’s profession or financial prospects, such as a shop or a minibus or a bureau. Second, a transition from inter-tribal into interpersonal conflict: whereas in pre-Soviet Tuva curse accusations were directed against rival “tribes” and misfortune afflicted the unit as a whole, now they emerge in circumstances where individuals are closely related to each other in various ways, such as white-collar workers and business partners or co-workers in private enterprises. We could argue that the idiom of curse affliction has also been “privatized”, following the privatization of the market and the job sector, which took place in the early 1990s. Third, development of a “cosmopolitan” dimension: the local repertoire of cursing has internalized the concept of “bio-energy”, which is central to discourses and practices of “bio-energetic” or “alternative” healing, a recent phenomenon which is popular in Russian cities. We will see Balgan refer to “bio-energy” as a gloss for local (although, as he will claim,

⁵ Yet one could also discern a reverse process taking place, namely, a return to kin-based (clan) organization in the context of collective shamanic ceremonies, performed to request health and protection from the spirits or to see off the soul of a dead relative.

unfamiliar to modern Tuvans) meanings of cleansing from curses, to legitimize the efficacy of his healing practices (as a sign of the modernization of shamanic therapeutic techniques).

To round off the arguments advanced above: certain people in Tuva resort to a pre-Soviet idiom of conflict, curse affliction, to make sense of misfortunes resulting from the post-socialist transition. This process could be viewed as a “revival” of a pre-Soviet repertoire of the imagination, which enables “people to construe whole social fields or emerging institutions” (Humphrey 2002b: xxi), such as the tensions and frustrations associated with private entrepreneurship and competition for jobs. In other words, a cultural repertoire, which is absent from the Soviet ethnographic literature but has been part of collective memory, is invoked to make sense of precariousness and misfortune.

1.4. Encounters with shamans and clients

Interestingly, Kyzyl, the capital city of Tuva, was not the only place where I had plans for doing fieldwork. I also intended to research shamanism in Ulan-Ude, the capital city of the Republic of Buryatia, where I travelled in May 2002 for a conference. My impressions of Ulan-Ude were quite good: the city seemed to be modern (by Siberian standards). I thought that this place could provide a decent quality of life, although I did not have unrealistic expectations (I thought that I would be unable to cope with the harsh conditions of Siberian life). Additionally, I had established some useful connections in the local Academy of Sciences, who could help me to set up and carry out the fieldwork. Thanks to these connections, I had the chance to meet Bair Zambalovich, a Buryat shaman in Ulan-Ude. The only thing that worried me was the absence of shamanic Associations. I had been told that in the 1990s a shamanic Association, headed by a female Buryat shaman, existed in Ulan-Ude, but it had been closed. By that time, I had read Caroline Humphrey’s article on shamans in Ulan-Ude. According to this source, this Association had fallen by the wayside due to conflicts between shamans, while shamans, who were formerly involved in this establishment, could only be found through a mutual connection (1999: 7). I worried that this would raise serious impediments to any attempts of doing fieldwork in this town.

Some weeks before travelling to Ulan-Ude, I had the chance to attend a lecture at the Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies Unit (Cambridge) by Galina Lindquist, an anthropologist who had carried out fieldwork on shamanic revival in South Siberia (in particular, Tuva) for several years. It was from her paper entitled “On the quest for the authentic shaman” (2001) that I learned about the existence of shamanic Associations in Kyzyl. I thought that these Associations would provide an appropriate field site for my research (and, thus, I opted for Tuva). Furthermore, I was impressed by Lindquist’s accounts of shamanic performances in Tuva and Khakassia, and I thought that I would have the opportunity to observe and to write about shamans in states of trance, reinventing thus classical descriptions of Tungus shamanism, such as the seances described by the ethnographer Arkadii Anisimov (see Section 5.3.). Yet, returning from Ulan-Ude, I found it hard to choose between these two places. Besides personal worries about the quality of life, I had to cope with the problem of language. I knew already that, in contrast to Ulan-Ude, Russian is not widely spoken in Kyzyl, even less so in the Tuvan provinces. I worried that it would be impossible to master the Tuvan language, so as to converse with my informants and collect materials during the year of my fieldwork. As I expected, my concerns that it would be very difficult to speak Tuvan during my research were confirmed in the field.

My fieldwork lasted almost twelve months (September 2002–August 2003). Apart from rare expeditions to districts lasting no more than a few days on each occasion, I was based in Kyzyl throughout my research. My arrival at Kyzyl was followed by serious complications regarding the procedure of registration, which applies to foreigners. On the grounds that my visa was sponsored by an organization based in St. Petersburg, local authorities demanded that I return to St. Petersburg in order to register there first. However, since my attempts to register in St. Petersburg were unsuccessful, I returned to Kyzyl aiming to secure support from a local institution. Finally, these problems were solved only after the mediation of the Tuvan State University. Following this, I moved from a hotel, where I had been staying during my negotiations with the authorities, to a spacious apartment which was owned by a pleasant family of ethnic Tuvans, a gynecologist working in the hospital, her husband, a computer analyst (both of them in their late 30s), and their two children. They all lived in another apartment nearby. One of my priorities soon after I settled was to start to attend classes in Tuvan at the Institute of Humanitarian Research in Kyzyl.

I selected one of the four shamanic Associations, which at that time existed in Kyzyl, as my field site. The reasons for this were the affordable fee, which was required for my research, and the informal atmosphere of this Association. The only person concerned with collecting the fee was the cashier; I paid a monthly flat fee, but my sponsorship did not affect my interactions with the shamans, who overall avoided asking for money. My relationships with most of them grew friendly from the beginning of my research. To my surprise, they did not seem to be affected by my presence. Characteristically, our acquaintance would not last more than a few moments, during which they would ask a few things about me, and then would go to make tea or treat a client.

I narrowed my research to a particular shaman of this Association, Balgan. I did the same with his clients eventually, in particular, focusing on one of them, whom I present in the third case study. My field strategy was to probe my informants' thoughts about misfortune and the consultations in which they were involved, something that would be impossible if I had diffused the scope of my fieldwork and collected data from different shamans and clients from all these Associations. Certainly, the latter strategy—assuming that it can be feasible for a single researcher—would have yielded a body of quantifiable data, which would better serve the purpose of estimating the incidence of curse affliction and spirit affliction. Nonetheless, this strategy would not have granted me access to people's narratives of their social reality, such as Balgan's theory of starvation and privations, which led me to delineate the social context of curse accusations. Likewise, I would not have elicited from him two crucial parts of his psychobiography, which led me to consider that major elements of his ritual repertoire—healing and retaliation—have their motivational roots in the ills of post-socialism and the period of Soviet repression. To appreciate the historical and social forces working behind shamanic initiation and transformation, I engaged in a long interaction with Balgan.

I used the Russian language throughout my fieldwork (during the first weeks I faced some difficulties with communicating in Russian, which gradually subsided). Yet my increasing knowledge of Tuvan enabled me to understand the dialogues between shamans and clients to some extent. Whenever immediate translation in Russian was necessary, I was dependent on the shamans' acquiescence and the clients' benevolence. To interview some Tuvan clients with very little knowledge of Russian, I employed an interpreter, a young Tuvan woman who was teaching English in a college in Kyzyl and who supplemented her income by working as an interpreter for foreign scholars and tourists travelling to Kyzyl every summer. She helped me to translate (from a tape) parts of the dialogues between Balgan and one of his clients in which Tuvan was the language spoken, as well as some of Balgan's ritual invocations, which he had written for me.

There exists a phenomenon in the literature, which Obeyesekere calls the "interpreter effect": the influence of the interpreter on the progress of fieldwork and on the meanings that the ethnographer makes of his translated data (1990: 235-36). Even though it is the case that the interpreter's "psychological propensities and social class might well slant the investigation into one direction or another" (1990: 236), I think that the influence of this interpreter on my fieldwork, if any, must have been rather limited. I employed her only occasionally, and did not develop any close interaction with her. To mention some remarkable features from our cooperation, I was impressed by her professionalism, which was expressed through immediate and coherent translations of the informants' responses. Additionally, she could understand my research topic and my theoretical approach to it, and she used to critically position herself about my research. To mention an example, once, she translated in Russian an article I had written, based on my materials; at the end of our session, she mentioned that she agreed with my premise that analytical emphasis must be given to the patient, who is absent from interpretations of ritual healing. My interpreter was not simply an assistant who mediated communication between me and informants, whenever the circumstances called for this; she was actively involved in the production and analysis of these data and, I suspect, her influence on the tenor of my fieldwork could have been important, if I had cooperated with her more systematically.

I was going to my field site on a daily basis. Owing to the particularity of the situation, I came up with a fieldwork methodology. First, I would approach the clients and ask them about their problem; in this way, I could elicit in Russian advance information about a consultation, which would be enacted in Tuvan. Second, I would attend the consultation, keeping notes about the client's psychological behaviour and his/her discussion with the shaman, and I would use a tape recorder, whenever allowable. Third, I would arrange a meeting with the client to discuss his or her problem. I would also discuss this with the shaman after the consultations. I should note that this was the most optimal scenario; in most cases, the clients avoided my questions, protecting the privacy of their circumstances, while some of them even objected to my presence at their consultation. Approximately eight out of ten clients would avoid any interaction with me, intending in

this way to maintain privacy (something that was a regular source of difficulty during my fieldwork).

Either during a consultation or an interview, clients faced with scepticism the use of a recorder; by contrast, most shamans relished being recorded during ritual action. Whenever my intention to record a consultation was met with resistance, Balgan would solve this by explaining to the client that I was researching his ritual practice. In interviews, my interpreter (or in her absence, myself) would convince the client about the necessity of recording, promising that the conversation would not reach other ears (a promise which I kept in every case). I collected almost all the materials of this study with the use of a tape recorder (and a camcorder on some occasions). As a result, my field notes consisted of transcriptions of dialogues between shamans, their clients, and me.

In my interactions with informants, I adopted a dispassionate and detached identity, trying to make my presence in the consultations as imperceptible as possible. However, I was forced into the apprentice's role by Balgan, for whom my conversion into a student (*uchenik*, in Russian) was a source of prestige in front of his clients. I did not hold unrealistic expectations about undergoing a shamanic initiation, although some shamans encouraged me to do so. I tried learning to drum and invoke the spirits, but I soon gave up due to my unwillingness to publicly perform with a drum as a shamanic disciple. However, I showed an interest in eliciting from Balgan and from other shamans of the Association their knowledge on how the curses work against a human target and, more critically, what kinds of techniques or spells are indispensable for cursing. I purposefully cultivated this personal interest due to the following two reasons.

First, I felt attracted by the shamans' discourse about curses, a kind of knowledge, which I considered to be esoteric, hard to elicit and extremely valuable as a body of ethnographic data. Second, I thought that my immersion in cursing, namely, a means of harming an enemy, would provide a unique opportunity to revisit and resolve a personal crisis, an event, which was a source of agitation for me in the past. A couple of years before I went to Tuva, I had been involved in an interpersonal conflict, which entailed a heavy loss for me. For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot be more specific as to this conflict or the enemy involved. I shall only mention that for many months I laboured under an unbearable sense of injustice and I was convinced that punishment should be imposed on the "evildoer". I consulted several lawyers, but I was told that my allegations could not support a case in the court. From a legal point of view, there was no incriminating evidence. Although my adherence to rationalism did not allow me to believe that this intention could be accomplished through retaliatory sorcery, my interaction with Balgan, a shaman who—as he often repeated—could command the powers of cursing, led me to play with this possibility. I had nothing to lose or risk.

It is only now (at the final stages of writing) that I realize that my case was similar to the three cases, which I present in-depth: we all laboured under a sense of injustice since we wanted to have our enemies punished as expeditiously as possible. Nonetheless, as we will see, legal mechanisms of redressing injustices scarcely ever yield the desired outcome, if at all. Thus, in the absence of an expedient system of justice, people resort to shamanic specialists (or, as we shall see, even combine legal and shamanic strands of recourse) in order to punish their enemies. Finally, after I persuaded Balgan that I had suffered from injustice, he agreed to fulfil my request: we will see him practise supernatural retaliation against the person identified by me.

1.5. Kinds of shamanic impulse

The term for "shaman" in Tuvan is *kham* (plural: *khamnar*). The reader, who is familiar with the shamanic traditions of South Siberia, will notice a similarity with the Altaic term for "shaman", *kam* (which owes to the fact that the Tuvan language belongs to the family of Ural-Altaic languages). Mongush Kenin-Lopsan, a native expert on shamanism in Tuva, distinguishes the following kinds of shamans (1999, 1987):

1) *Yzyguur salgap khamnaan khamnar* (shamans drawing their descent from an ancestral shamanic spirit of their lineage). This category conforms to the general pattern of hereditary bestowal of shamanic power, which Eliade described for Central and North Asia. According to this, the chosen one is afflicted with fits by an ancestral shamanic spirit, and learns how to invoke this spirit as an apprentice next to an experienced shaman (1964: 18-20). Vera Pavlovna D'iakonova, an ethnographer of Tuva, writes that, during the ritual for his consecration as a shaman, the novice has a vision of being eaten by worms, so that he is reduced to his skeleton (1981: 136; also Alekseyev 1984: 137). As he mentioned, Balgan draws his shamanic descent from his shaman-grandmother, *Kara-Kys*. According to him, hereditary shamans are not recruited through spirit affliction, noting that this is the typical pattern of election for *albys* shamans (see below). In the process, he will describe his initiation as involving transmission of "bio-energy", a curative force which the "spirit" of

Kara-kys had passed on to him. Based on elderly informants' memories of pre-Soviet shamanism, Kenin-Lopsan mentions that hereditary shamans were considered among Tuvans as the most powerful of all kinds of shamans (1987: 12)—a premise which Balgan often emphasized to differentiate himself from the non-hereditary shamans who were employed in his Association.

2) *Sug-cher eezinden khamnaan khamnar* (shamans drawing their power from spirits of water springs and earth). I did not work with shamans of this kind; we will not revisit this sort of impulse further in this work.

3) *Deerlerden khamnaan khamnar* (shamans drawing their power from spirits of heaven). Shamans of this category are considered to be of heavenly origin because they draw their power from the so-called *azarlar* spirits, who reside in heaven or even from the supreme deity of heaven, *Khaiyrakan*. Balgan himself used to mention that Kara-kys was a heavenly shaman. He designated himself as a “heavenly-hereditary” shaman (“*niebesnyi-potomstvennyi shamán*”, in Russian), which means that he inherited a heavenly “impulse” from her. The spirit of Kara-Kys exerts powerful control over Balgan. As he used to say in the consultations: “My grandmother directs me”. To my knowledge, he is the only “heavenly” shaman in his Association.

4) *Albystan khamnaan khamnar* (shamans drawing their power from the albys spirit). Shamans of this kind are considered especially apt in mastering the albys, an ambiguous spirit which attacks humans and afflicts them with fits, as well as an array of “evil” spirits (*chetker, shulbus, diireng, mangys*). Balgan told me that the albys is not an evil spirit, yet it is very suspicious of humans, who are curious about it, and attacks them to protect itself. Sightings of albys have yielded different descriptions of its appearance. According to Kenin-Lopsan's informants, albys spirits take the form of a handsome (Tuvan) man or a beautiful (Tuvan) woman, if they come across a woman or a man respectively (1999: 39). Shamans of Balgan's Association described it as a short creature with an amorphous countenance covered by long dark hair, or as a woman raising her long hair to reveal a countenance terrifying to its beholder. Whether one is faced with its attractive or its terrifying manifestation, encountering an albys inevitably leads to shamanic initiation as a cure against “insanity” caused by albys affliction. Balgan draws additionally a shamanic descent from his great-grandfather, an albys shaman called *Shokar-kham* (father of Kara-Kys). Shokar became a shaman after he was attacked by an albys, and he passed this “impulse” to his son, *Cherlik* (brother of Kara-Kys), who also became an albys shaman. In Balgan's Association, there were two shamans, who designated themselves as shamans of the “albys” kind (I briefly introduce one of them in Section 1.8).

Another self-designation, which Balgan often used, was that of *ak kham* (white shaman) as a way of differentiating himself from the sort of *kara kham* (black shaman). According to him, whereas a “white shaman” invokes the healthy spirits of heaven and uses them only for curing, a “black shaman” calls upon evil spirits from the underworld, *Erlík Oran*, which he commands not only for curing but also for driving somebody ill. Balgan told me that in the pre-Soviet past a “black shaman” was called only in cases where the patient's life was in danger; the cure would consist in introducing evil spirits to the patient's body, since, as it was believed, only such spirits could remedy grave illnesses. As he stressed, “black shamans” are not necessarily evil and, therefore, should not be confused with shamans commissioned to harm someone through cursing, whom Balgan called “evil”. By the latter, Balgan referred to a distinct category of shamans who are believed to be specialists in harmful magic and who are commissioned for this purpose nowadays in Tuva (I do not have any evidence whether such specialists exist or whether malevolent magic and sorcery are practised). According to Valentina Süzükei, a well-known Tuvan ethnomusicologist and an expert in local traditions, exceptionally powerful shamans can both cure and cause harm (personal communication). My impression is that “black shamans” should also be differentiated from “albys shamans”, although they both claim to control evil spirits; whereas “black shamans” are initiated after an affliction with evil spirits, the latter specialists are initiated after being afflicted by an albys—a spiritual entity whose intentions are not identified as “evil”.

It seems that the above classification of shamans into distinct categories is arbitrary. For instance, Balgan's shamanic descent involves more than a single category (1, 3, 4): he designates himself as a “hereditary-heavenly” shaman based on his descent from Kara-Kys, a heavenly shaman; also, he identifies a distant line of descent from an “albys shaman”. We should conceptualize these categories as “impulses” or dispositions which may coexist or even compete for prevalence within the same person—as we shall see, Balgan himself.

1.6. Curses, malignity, and retribution

Balgan distinguished between four kinds of “curses”: First, *buzhar*, a kind of curse which causes minor illnesses or misfortunes. Balgan used the Russian word *porcha* (curse, spoiling, damage) to refer to *buzhar*.

Once, he explained a problem I had with my stomach as a result of *buzhar*, which an evil shaman had cast against me. As Balgan mentioned, *buzhar* can also take the meaning of “curse”, when illness or death are explained as the result of coming in contact with a grave or the remnants of a dead human. Second, *kargysh*, a curse, which brings about serious illness or misfortune, or even death. Typical is also the doublet *kargysh-yrgysh*. Third, *adaargal*, (translated as envy), an equally serious kind of curse, which has dire consequences for its victim. A particular type of *adaargal* is *kara-dyl*, which is translated as “black tongue”. According to this, envious and malign speech about somebody is a condition that engenders a misfortune. Fourth, the dreaded *chatka*: Balgan described it as an extremely dangerous kind of curse, which only powerful shamans and very malicious persons can accomplish. When a curse is uttered, this leads to the emergence of *doora*: this takes the form of an illness (invisible to non-shamans) which lies in ambush, waiting for the target to appear. Several shamans used the Russian adverb *poperiok* (across) in referring to the *doora*, emphasizing its propensity to lie in wait and to assault a victim walking on the street. The victim does not feel anything at the moment of the attack, yet the *doora* inserts itself in his/her body, causing an illness. Balgan reserved the above four terms for kinds of malignant and unjustifiable cursing.

Balgan often used the terms *kargysh* and *chatka* interchangeably, although in our conversations he used the Russian word for “curse”, *prokliatiye*, in referring to these conditions. In response to my interest in learning words and spells (*zaklinaniya*, in Russian) for cursing, Balgan mentioned that a curse affliction could be accomplished simply by thinking malicious thoughts or uttering words of hate (either secretly or openly) about somebody or by envying someone. Yet the shaman Oyumaa (whom we will meet in Section 1.8), told me that the effects of *prokliatiye* are far more drastic if somebody commissions a special ritual performed by a shaman to this purpose. I suspect that several shamans know spells or imprecations for cursing. Yet it is very difficult to elicit such information, because this would imply that they have practised cursing either due to their malign thoughts for a person or in a ritual for a client intending to magically harm an enemy.

According to Galina Lindquist, who, as mentioned earlier, had carried out fieldwork on shamanism in Tuva, a curse can be “sent” against somebody either intentionally, as bad words and malign wishes explicitly directed against a person, or unintentionally, as a result of a conflict or a grudge (personal communication)⁶. Based on this, a distinction between two kinds of cursing can be made. First, intentional cursing, in which one externalizes unjustifiable malignity against somebody by such means as thinking malicious thoughts or uttering imprecations or commissioning a shaman to curse the target of his/her malice or envy. Second, unintentional, in which a curse is born from an offense one has suffered, and takes revenge on the offender independently of the victim’s intention or even awareness. In the first case, the curse is an instrument under the control of a malign person intending to harm his/her victim. In the second, it is an unconscious force, uncontrolled by the person, which strikes the offender, seeking righteous retaliation. That is, it is a kind of retribution, which is automatically instigated by an offense that a person has suffered. Therefore, there is no moral condemnation for the offended person, since this retaliatory force is beyond a person’s control and it emerges in response to an offense the latter has suffered. Below, I relay an example of this latter sense of retaliation which Balgan revealed to me as part of his life narrative:

Some years ago I was rich and I used to help my friends by lending them money. Once, I gave large sums of money to two friends of mine because they were in great need. If I had kept the money, I could have bought two *Volga* cars. They agreed to repay me, but they did not. Finally, they fell sick and implored me to forgive them. Of course, I feel sorry for these people and I forgave them. But it is not me; it is my first name, *Kara-ool*, which punished them. My grandmother, Kara-Kys, gave me this name to punish evil people. That is, she has passed on to me her name for punishing evil people, as she did. Even though I am a white shaman, I have a black name for that purpose. Even if you say only once “Kara-ool is bad”, this name will take revenge on you.

By this narrative, Balgan implies that he is unaware of the particular moves that his retaliatory faculty, which is embedded in his name, may make (though he is aware that the faculty of retaliation is intrinsic in this name). It is an “agency” which operates beyond his control. However, I must underscore that Balgan would never use the term “*prokliatiye*” or any other of the Tuvan terms for “curse” to describe this kind of retribution. For him, all these terms are associated with morally reprehensible words and practices through which envy, rancour, and harmful intentions are expressed. He said he would never endorse such behaviour; on the contrary, during a consultation, he scolded a female client who confessed that she had secretly cursed

⁶ Lindquist had discussed with me some of her field materials about “curses” at my request, whilst I was writing my doctoral thesis (from 2004 to 2007).

a relative and enemy of hers. Likewise, he drew a firm distinction between the above terms and *nakazaniye* (punishment, in Russian), claiming that he would agree to punish an evildoer on behalf of a client, but he would never accept to curse someone at a client's request. To retaliate against a person's misdeeds, Balgan needs to have the full name of the evildoer written on a paper, on which he focuses his eyes (this functions also as a visionary technique of divination). Another way of accomplishing retaliation, which Balgan mentioned, was a simple process of concentrating his eyesight on a photo showing the intended victim.

As I mentioned earlier, I had a first-hand experience of retaliatory sorcery, which Balgan practised at my request. This event took place when the sun was going down (according to Balgan, this is the ideal moment for this kind of operation). Balgan asked me to write my enemy's full name on a paper, and he had his eyes fixed on it for a couple of minutes without speaking. In the process, he mentioned that his eyesight was traversing the sky toward the enemy's homeland. This visionary flight was concluded with a finding which struck me at that moment. Balgan announced that at the moment his eyesight "struck" the target, the latter happened to be in an office, which he described to me with uncanny accuracy (although at that time I was not aware that I had sometimes referred to this office and its surroundings in my conversations with Balgan). I must underscore that these methods of punishment (staring at the victim's name or photo) do not involve intervention by spirits. Rather they involve the power of shamanic vision as a means of perceiving hidden information and carrying further the client's intention for revenge.

The kinds of curses, which I introduced above, substantially differ from practices which anthropologists define as "sorcery"; namely, techniques, which involve homeopathic or contagious magic with the use of spells, incantations, or noxious substances (Obeyesekere 1975: 1; Turner 1967: 120). The only similarity, which exists between cursing and sorcery, relates to the practitioner's intention which is destructive in either case (an additional analogy would be the use of special spells or incantations to cause harm). I do not have any empirical evidence of whether malevolent magic of the "sorcery" kind is practised in Tuva, although this practice is known with the Russian expression *chiornaya magiya* (black magic). Balgan used the Russian term *magiya* for rituals performed by specialists in causing harm, though he tended to use the terms *prokliatiye* and *magiya* interchangeably. Following him, I will use the Russian term for "curse" (*prokliatiye*) in the third case study, where a pattern of malevolent magic is involved. However, we could establish an analogy between Balgan's terms for cursing and another classic term in the anthropological literature, namely "witchcraft". Recalling Evans-Pritchard's definition of witchcraft among the Azande, as an agency causing harm by means of a psychic force (1937), it appears that cursing operates similarly. According to this, it involves a non-empirical (for outsiders) weapon for causing harm; the presence of the "doora", the latter being the materialization of an actor's hostile intentions against a victim or an enemy.

1.7. Shamanic trance, the spirits, and healing

The following discussion will draw on a revealing statement, which Balgan made regarding "trance", a state of mind, which he defined as a prerequisite for contacting the spirits in rituals. In his own words:

The clients, who live in Kyzyl and come here to consult me, know nothing about trance and shamanism. I can perform in the manner of the old shamans only when elderly Tuvan clients are present. With those modern clients, I cannot go into a trance and fall on the ground unconscious; if I do so, they will think that I am insane (pause). This is how our shamans performed rituals in the past; at the moment when the shaman would fall on the ground trembling, the community would encircle him and people would exclaim "*serip bolgan!*"⁷. When the shaman would regain his consciousness, the people around him would ask him what he had seen during the trance, what the cause of an illness was, how they should protect themselves from evil spirits.

This narrative on rituals (a narrative that may also be influenced by current ideas concerning "shamanism" as a public spectacle for enthusiasts and academic visitors, as well as by notions about the importance of an "audience") is interesting for an intriguing reason. Although this description resonates to some extent with classic accounts of rituals, in which the performer's state of mind was inseparable from the emotional states of spectators or participants in these rituals (as the latter emerges from ethnographies of shamanism among the Tungus and other Siberian peoples), it stands in contrast with a Tuvan custom concerning shamanic practice. This contrast between shamanic rituals in the past and contemporary collective performances is revealed in Figure 6, where the performers are all united on the basis of membership to an "Association" (or a religious organization). The purpose of this collective ceremony was to solicit the spirits' protection and to

⁷ Past tense of the verb *seriir*, which means: "to conclude the shamanic (*kamlaniye*) ritual".

invite these spirits to bless the audience which consisted of ethnic Tuvans. This picture of shamanic ritual differs from traditional descriptions, according to which a shaman would practise on his/her own in front of the members of a family. Victoria Soyán Peemot, a Tuvan ethnographer of herding and horse-breeding communities in the Altai-Sayan Mountain Region, suggests that in the past shamans called on their spirits without any attendants or apprentices supporting them, at least except for their close kin who could attend to the shaman's requests and words during the "ritual process" (known as *khamnaashkyn*). Furthermore, according to this native source, the phase of shamanic transitioning from ordinary perception (described as "*serip bolgan*" in Balgan's narrative) corresponds to a "post-trance" state; that is, a phase during which a shaman would resume his/her consciousness after experiencing a lapse of mystical abandon, followed by instructions to a patient or by revelations about "hidden" things. This revelatory part of "*khamnaashkyn*" is rendered through several remarkably perceptive linguistic tropes. I will illustrate this with several Tuvan phrases: "Ол ынчап тура-ла тапкылааш, эзеп-эзеп, чоорту оожургап сериир" (translated as: "After smoking and yawning a lot, [the shaman] little by little calms down and finishes the ritual")⁸; "Сериир чоогунда үндүрер чүүлөр", translated as: "Things that have to be taken outside [revealed] close to the end of the ritual" (Victoria Soyán Peemot, personal communication).

Drawing on Balgan's narrative, it can be inferred that in the past the shaman's trance was an epistemology of knowledge with which native communities countered misfortune and uncertainty. With his reference to his modern clients, Balgan seems to imply that the technique of trance has lost the importance it had for his predecessors as a way of uncovering the unknown. Although I cannot prove it at this point of my research, I would suggest that the decline of kinds of knowledge associated with religious agencies, reflects the impact of Soviet modernity, which was suspicious of shamanism and particularly of the shaman's performances. Balgan cannot give an authentic expression to his impetus for trance rituals due to social constraints. His performance has to conform to the aesthetic expectations and concerns of his modern clientele. The result of this incomplete "shamanship" is what may be called a "bourgeois" shamanic vocation, which is devoid of mental experiences which, according to Balgan, were an indispensable part of shamanic performances.

The information below is derived from conversations about "trance" and curing, *emneer*, between Balgan and this author. Curing involves two stages: performing *kamlaniye* and laying hands on a client's body. "Kamlaniye" is a term which describes (in Russian) shamanic rituals of Siberian peoples, particularly the shaman's drumming and chanting to summon the spirits. Balgan used the Russian word *ochishcheniye* (cleansing), in describing the functions of "kamlaniye". In his own words, a kamlaniye ritual is a kind of quarantine, which encompasses a client who is being cleansed from curses and other negative "energies". Accordingly, kamlaniye is practised as a means of divination or in order to disclose the deeper causes of a client's problem. As Balgan told me, each time his performance of kamlaniye progressively deepens, he unconsciously immerses himself in an experience of trance, during which he is travelling—a journey which he perceives as a "flight" over the landscape—to a client's place of origin in the provinces of Tuva, in order to summon the spirits (*eeler*) of this place and bring these assistant spirits to the ritual for the client. The invited spirits remove the doora (or the illness caused by curses) from the client's body and heal the client by filling the latter (after the expulsion of the doora) with "bio-energy".

During this shamanic "flight", which can be described as a "soul flight" since it is his *sünezin* (soul, in Tuvan) that dissociates itself from his consciousness, Balgan visualizes his client's life unfolding in reverse: namely, adulthood and becoming a parent, and other significant stages of social life, such as marriage and employment, as well as childhood and village life or a family's relocation to Kyzyl. At some crucial point during this shamanic process of reversing social time (a process which Balgan characteristically described as an intellectual exercise akin to following a complex scenario of a movie or the plot of a novel), he can identify the cause of misfortune and the agent who is responsible for this. Balgan's kamlaniye was a vivid performance which was usually completed in approximately twenty minutes; this is longer than any other shaman's performance which I observed at the Association. Balgan used to close his kamlaniye with a highly controlled, performative whirling in imitation of the power of "whirlwind" (*kazyrgy*, in Tuvan), as a symbolic expression of sweeping the doora. In a sense, the latter technique was distinctive of his kamlaniye, since, as he rendered this, he is the only practitioner of his Association who accomplishes this act of ritual cleansing. A kamlaniye ritual has one more function (in addition to cleansing and filling with "bio-energy", and divination): it is a

⁸ Cited in Zoya Kyrgysova Kyrgys (1990) "Тыва улустуң алгыш йөрээлдери" (Tuva people's algysh-yöreel ritual chants), pp. 64-65. Kyzyl: Tuvan Publishing House.

means of retaliation, whereby the curses are sent back to the initial offender.

An important clarification is in order at this point: throughout the year of my fieldwork I did not observe a *kamlaniye* ritual, in which Balgan had a “deep” or a complete trance—if by “trance” we refer to a condition involving behaviour characteristic of “ecstatic shamanism”, such as convulsions, loss of consciousness and a range of sensational features documented in the literature (see Peters and Price-Williams 1980; Vitebsky 1995: 64-65). Therefore, the performances, which this book examines, are in many respects different from pre-Soviet shamanic rituals (see Anisimov 1963; Shirokogoroff 1935: 306-308), which were designed to have dramatic effects on the patient and the participants.

Though Balgan did not display the typical features of deep trance during his *kamlaniye* (as we saw, social constraints prevent him from going into a full trance), I would not preclude the possibility that he may have experienced a lesser degree of trance involving mental dissociation from his surroundings. Finding the cause of a client’s misfortune during *kamlaniye*—a purpose that involves observing the client’s biography in reverse—probably leads him to experience some form of mental dissociation from his surroundings. Several external features were suggestive of Balgan’s intention of attaining a state of visualization or a sort of mental concentration during *kamlaniye*. These features involved signs of a contorted face with eyes closed, in a process of swinging his head from side to side and beating the drum. Although these features do not reflect his state of consciousness during *kamlaniye* in any accurate manner, they constitute instances of a shamanic ritual involving a culturally defined state of dissociation from physical surroundings.

If the *doora* had not been completely removed by *kamlaniye*, Balgan would proceed to another technique: namely, laying the palms of his hands on a client’s body, to remove the remnants of the *doora* and to pass “bio-energy”. This practice involves the concentration of the *doora* on his palm and the transmission of “bio-energy”, which reinstates the proper function of an organ. Balgan practised this physical remedy in all the consultations which I observed (in all these cases his diagnosis involved curse affliction). According to him, if the *doora* has entered a patient’s body and has multiplied, removal is possible only by means of laying hands on the ailing patient. After holding the invisible *doora* tightly in his hands, Balgan used to rush outside growling to dispose of it in the courtyard of the Association; his growls were caused by physical contact with the *doora*, an experience which he described as lifting a heavy stone. As he told me, he can feel whether there is *doora* left in the client’s body, by means of laying his hand on a specific area of a client’s body. A sensation of touching something as hairy as a bear’s hide indicates the presence of *doora*. When the *doora* is removed from the client’s body, it assumes a disturbing form, namely, the shadow or the contour of the perpetrator of curse affliction against the client. This process of removing the *doora* does not require Balgan to experience trance or a transition to a mentally dissociative state.

Apart from the spirits of a client’s homeland, Balgan invoked several other spirits for curing, depending on the seriousness of an illness. Thus, he may invoke the spirit of his shaman-grandmother, Kara-Kys, but he does so only under life-threatening circumstances, because, as he mentioned, it is very difficult to summon this spirit. When this happens, the spirit descends from heaven, treats the client momentarily, and flies back to heaven. Another important spirit is his *eeren*; each shaman possesses his/her *eeren*, a spirit which is summoned for curing. Balgan’s *eeren* is the spirit of the bear (*adyg*, in Tuvan), which, as Vainshtein writes (1964: 2, 1978: 459, 1984: 355), is regarded by shamanists in Tuva as the most powerful shamanic spirit. Balgan reported a standard shamanic experience of transformation into his helping spirit during *kamlaniye*: that is, he “changes” into a bear. I must note that he did not express this transformation during *kamlaniye* in any symbolic form. Balgan’s *eeren* resides in two receptacles: a human-like effigy hanging over his chair, and a wooden figure representing a human face, which is attached to the crosspieces of his drum [Figure 1].

A final comment should be made regarding “bio-energy”. As I mentioned, Balgan described the experience of *kamlaniye* as a flight to the client’s homeland, whence he summons the spirits, asking them to remove curses from the client and fill him/her with “bio-energy”. In our discussions about healing, as well as in his consultations with clients, he referred to this curative force by the Russian terms “*bio-energiya*” or simply “*energiya*”. These terms correspond to “bio-energetic healing”, a system of healing practices based on the idea that organisms are surrounded by fields of “energy”, which can be perceived and mentally controlled by certain healers who claim (or are believed) to possess the gift of *extra-sensory* perception; that is, the ability to perceive the bio-fields and radiations both within and outside a body and to correct their functions. Such practitioners are principally known in Russia as *extrasensy*, “bio-field healers” or “extra-sensorial healers”. Bio-energetic healing and paranormal experiences, an issue that captured the popular imagination in Russia, became the subject of scientific research under the auspices of the KGB in Soviet times. After the collapse

of the USSR, these “mystical” healing doctrines reached a wider circulation, assuming proportions of “mass hysteria” triggered by mega-scale magicians such as Anatolii Kashpirovski, whose performances of hypnotism in stadiums were telecast throughout Russia. At the same time, research on this field involved laboratory experiments with healers, believed to have paranormal abilities, under the auspices of scientific committees such as the “All-Russian Scientific Research Center of Traditional Medicine” (Lindquist 2001a, 2001b).

Balgan’s interpretation of his therapeutic efficacy in terms of “bio-energy” does not mean that he designates himself as an *extrasens* (singular of “extrasensy”). The contrary, he used to invoke his shamanic descent in order to claim authenticity and ritual efficacy, and to differentiate himself from the tide of various wizards and psychics in Kyzyl, whom he pejoratively cast as “extrasensy”, a term that for him has connotations of ritual inefficiency and fraud. Moreover, Balgan justified his penchant for using a term, which is the flagship of this kind of healers whom he rejects, as a gloss for indigenous senses of healing which accords (although rather uneasily) with his modern clients’ familiarity with bio-energy. In his own words:

By “bio-energiya” I refer to the healing spirits which I summon from nature. Nowadays, most of the clients understand the cure as an effect of bio-energiya rather than of spirits. I call my cure “bio-energiya”, so that they understand me.

Thus, to achieve consensus with his clients and to claim therapeutic efficacy, Balgan is compelled to drawing on a currently popular therapeutic discourse, which is used by practitioners whom he designates as inauthentic. The analysis will return to Balgan’s experiences of bio-energy in Chapter Six, where it will be argued that the sort of bio-energy which he experiences, is a metaphor for a conflict between the specters of his ancestors, who struggle within Balgan in order to take full possession of him.

1.8. Narratives of shamanic initiation

An attempt to construct a picture of Balgan’s character—to the extent that I was able to understand his personality in-depth during only one year—is beyond the purpose of this study. At the time of my fieldwork in Kyzyl (in 2003), Balgan was in his mid-fifties and lived with his second wife (a Tuvan herself, who was the cashier of the Association). His first wife, with whom he begat several children, died in 1996. Balgan, who was working as a shaman until that time, gave up his practice and went through a period of isolation as a result of this loss. I did not probe this, because I was afraid that my interrogations would undermine the good relationship I had established with him. Yet a comment he made possibly throws light on the events of this loss: “I was young, handsome, and she did not like the fact that as a shaman I was treating women”.

Having overcome this crisis, Balgan resumed his shamanic activity in 1999 and soon became the Head of a shamanic Association in Kyzyl. However, internal enmities in this Association forced Balgan, as he told me, to leave the Association. In 2000 he and another senior shaman from his previous workplace founded another Association, which numbered sixteen shamans (as of 2004). Balgan (as the Head of the Association) along with a few more shamans (I introduce two of them below) treat the majority of the clients, as the other shamans roam throughout Tuva for offering their services and they may not return to the Association for months; I doubt whether I saw all the shamans of the Association during my fieldwork. The Association was accommodated in an old, small house, which is divided into two spaces: the main consultation room, where Balgan and the second founding member have their desks, and a smaller room used by all the other shamans (yet this working division is somewhat loose, as sometimes other shamans used Balgan’s desk to receive clients, when he was absent or busy with repairing his car, a dilapidated old Volga). Balgan emphasized that everything has run smoothly for him after he resumed his shamanic vocation.

Balgan was born in the mid-1950s in the locality of *Kara-Bulung*, two hours away from Kyzyl. He spent the first twelve years of his life with his grandparents in a yurt. He recalled these years as a period of affluence. As he mentioned, his grandmother, Kara-Kys, was a “great shaman” (*ylg kham*), who was renowned throughout Tuva for her healing rituals. At that time, shamans received cattle as a reward for a *kamlaniye* ritual, and Kara-Kys had accumulated a herd as a result of the numerous healing rituals she had performed. Thus, Balgan lived in abundance during the first years of his life. He did not go to school during this period of living with his grandparents. As he mentioned to me, he studied next to his grandfather, a lama who had been educated in the *sutras* (Lamaist texts) in Tibet, and he learned his grandmother’s techniques of healing by participating in her rituals as her assistant.