Shamanism in Siberia: Sound and Turbulence in Cursing Practices in Tuva

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Chapter 6

Beyond curses

In the midst of turbulent Kyzyl

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6 Beyond curses

In the midst of turbulent Kyzyl

It was the beginning of May and the whole city was preparing for the Victory Day celebrations.[1] Every day, amid the loud orders of the Russian military, the youth of Tuva practised parading along the streets of Kyzyl while the local choir, composed mainly of Tuvan men, rehearsed Soviet songs on a small stage situated at the heart of the central square. One afternoon, I was returning home from my Tuvan language lessons and I decided to cross the square to see how the preparations were coming along. The first thing I noticed was the air filled with brown clouds while a sandstorm characterised by numerous small tornadoes was looming on the horizon. As the square began to be consumed by wind and grains of sand, I watched a group of maybe 12-year-old girls practising their dance routine on stage. They were singing a 2014 world hit, 'Waka Waka' ('This Time for Africa'), a song performed by the Colombian pop star Shakira. In the midst of the approaching storm, they kept on imitating the singer's moves from the video clip and following the music. I was deeply struck by this almost surreal scene: a group of young Tuvans practising a Colombian pop star's hit about Africa at an event meant to commemorate the victory of the Soviet Union over the Nazis, performed in the middle of the steppe, in a sandstorm in Kyzyl, on the southern border of Siberia.

What is particularly compelling about this image is that in yet another way it brings together sound and turbulence while exemplifying the mosaic like forms of life in the capital of Tuva, where curses are an integral part. In this book, I have looked at sound and turbulence and the ways in which they come together in cursing rituals. I have discussed how the sounds of shamanic drums produce one kind of semi-controlled turbulence while the shamans' clients become subjected to another kind of uncontrolled and dangerous turbulence produced by curses. I have also explored how shamanic voice and the sounds it delivers become a powerful tool capable of controlling cursing practices and the dynamics within ritual proceedings. What happens though if we step outside the ritual arena? As a way of concluding this book, I would like to move beyond the immediate context of curses as embedded in shamanic rituals and consider some of the challenges faced by Kyzylians today, such as growing tensions between shamanic societies and shamans who work individually, alcohol addiction, extensive reliance on technology and the environmental crisis. While reflecting the complexity and the eclectic

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character of everyday life in Kyzyl (like the one I have just described in relation to the Victory Day celebrations), these challenges in yet another way combine shamans and sounds, while pointing to the kind of uncontrolled turbulence I have discussed in relation to the experience of curses.

This book has shown how instances of cursing arise from conflicts among humans and reflect wider tensions, which include humans and spirits alike, while producing at the same time a distinct sociocosmic drama. Being cursed is described as a form of intrusion, when spirits responsible for curse infliction disturb the victims and 'mess' with them. This, in turn, generates the experience of turbulence exemplified in confusion, as well as erratic and unpredictable behaviour. The same ideas of conflict, disturbance and uncertainty used to describe these experiences have been employed by Tuvan friends to talk about, among other things, a growing distrust towards shamans, losing the ability to hear certain sounds and being confronted with environmental changes, such us industrial and infrastructural development. As one Tuvan friend pointed out, facing these challenges is like a curse. Therefore, by bringing together the diverse topics that I have discussed in this book, I would like to consider here what Bubandt (2014) calls 'experiential symbiosis' where occult practices and certain global issues, such as the environmental crisis 'although embedded in a different epistemological logic, experientially may exist and function in a form of symbiosis' (2014: 241). In other words, I suggest that some of the aforementioned issues faced by Tuvans are experienced and talked about in the same way that curses are described and felt. At the same time, these issues open avenues to consider wider questions of disturbance and uncertainty associated with the present and the future of indigenous communities in Siberia in general.

Shaman show

The ethnography presented in this book shows how Tuvan shamans constitute central personas in the process of (un)folding sociocosmic interactions, which entails humans and non-humans alike and which is exemplified in curses. Beyond the immediate context of shamanic rituals, Tuvan shamans have also become, in particular, politically and socially involved actors whose roles have ranged from promoting indigenous cultures in regional and international arenas to addressing immediate problems faced by Tuvans on a daily basis in the form of counselling (I will return to this point later). Particularly instructive in this process has been the collapse of the Soviet regime. There has been a great amount of anthropological work dedicated to exploring the transition from socialist to post-socialist realms and the way this shift has reshaped understandings of shamanism (see, for example, Balzer 2005, 2008; Shimamura 2004; Vitebsky 2003). Tuvan shamanic practice is, inevitably, situated within the implications of this transition. Nonetheless, dynamics among shamans and the organisational side of their practices point to wider questions of authenticity and trust, and the ways in which Tuvans think about their present and their future today – 30 years after the end of the Soviet Union.

Throughout this book, numerous stories and narratives occasionally circled back or subtly echoed the troubling times immediately after the Soviet disintegration, when Tuvans were facing numerous economic, political and social challenges, similar to those other indigenous groups in Siberia were going through. As has been seen, living conditions in Tuva, especially at the beginning of the 1990s, were characterised by pervasive unemployment as well as widespread crime and violence. As a result, there has also been a strong trend towards the revitalisation of pre-Soviet practices, mainly through the establishment of shamanic societies instigated by the Tuvan intelligentsia along with the local government (see also Lindquist 2005; Pimienova 2013; Zorbas 2013, 2021). In this way, Tuvan shamans have been equipped with a new political role as the leaders of the so-called revivalism and the emblems of 'tradition' or ethnicity. However, when speaking to Tuvans, the perception of shamanic practice as a political tool and a symbol of identity, although successful in the academic and international arenas, within the sphere of everyday life constitutes an unusual arrangement and a subversion of the conceptualisations of shamanic practice as it is usually understood. This is particularly visible in the conflict and tensions between shamans associated with shamanic societies and shamans operating individually.

Shamanic practice among Tuvans is embedded in a particular skill of seeing and hearing what usually cannot be seen or heard (*bürülbaazyn*). As such, it is a technique of knowing rather than a system of knowledge, thus, attesting to the fluid and mobile characteristics of life in Tuva in general. Given the fact that spirits are said to constitute an integral element of everyday existence among Tuvans, shamanic practice is described within a rhetoric of mundane practicality, such as housekeeping, rather than being associated with the 'supernatural' milieu. However, shamans working for societies offer a very different kind of shamanic experience. After the end of the Soviet regime, eight shamanic societies were established in Kyzyl. These organisations were run by Mongush Borakhovich Kenin-Lopsan, the President for Life of all shamans and an academically trained and highly respected Tuvan expert on shamanism. The group of societies brought together shamans from all over Tuva. Despite having concrete political aims, from the Tuvans' perspective the establishment of the societies primarily had pragmatic implications. This is how one of the shamans who, at the time, supported Kenin-Lopsan described this process to me:

> Creating societies was a political move. Kenin-Lopsan and I fought a lot. In Soviet times the shamans practised in secrecy. We knew who had a real gift and who was a charlatan. After the nineties youngsters would come with us, follow us, study. You can't learn shamanism from the book, that neo-shamanism, that's silly. You know, at the end of the Soviet Union there was complete chaos here: alcoholism, crime and poverty. People needed help and they had to be reminded of our traditions. Do you know why Kenin-Lopsan named himself a president? Because 'president', that means something, it is a powerful word.

Indeed, as presented in many stories from that time, disease, unemployment and a persistent lack of food had a significant influence on living conditions in Kyzyl. As a result, the capital transformed into a place where the shamans' help was consistently required. Not long after, other 'religious' organisations, in particular the Orthodox Church, became suspicious of what they described as 'illegal medicine' offered by shamans trying to evade taxation. A practical need for official recognition of the shamanic societies was expressed and, in this way, eight shamanic societies were established in Kyzyl. The process of becoming a member of a society included lengthy training and was usually finalised with a test based on a practical examination in healing (see also Levin 2006, Stelmaszyk 2021). In this form, the members of a given society were assessing the prospective shaman's real powers and skills. Each new shaman would specialise in only one practice, for instance, divination with cards or treatment of headaches. Very often, the tests were performed on Kenin-Lopsan himself. The future shamans were asked, for example, to diagnose the causes of the President's high blood pressure or persistent headaches. In other cases, they were told to conduct divination rituals, including readings of the future and the past of the President. Some of these tests resulted in unexpectedly discovered secrets the content of which, with time, would become the subject of many humorous anecdotes circulating around Kyzyl. After the exam had concluded, Kenin-Lopsan would decide whether the student had passed and could become a shaman.[2] After that, the newly appointed shaman would receive a certificate, which stated what practices and treatments he or she could specialise in.

With time, shamanic societies, which were officially recognised as religious organisations, began to receive financial support from the government, as well as other forms of support becoming available for the shamans, such as assistance in obtaining a house lease or tax exemptions (VAT, income tax, property taxes) as well as means of transport (cars to visit their clients in rural areas) (Pimienova 2013: 127–129). The associated shamans were further guaranteed a minimum wage and would obtain regular salaries. As time passed, the links between the state and the shamanic societies weakened and soon enough they were forced to become self-sufficient. In addition to this, many shamans decided to leave the societies, which had started demanding a high percentage of their income in exchange for affiliation and access to clients. Not long after, those who chose to remain began to be accused of quackery and greediness focusing on personal benefit. Kyzylians started to be highly suspicious of the shamans working for the societies, and the relationships with them were characterised by fears of deep frustration and uncertainty. Many would whisper that affiliated shamans had been offering 'shaman-shows' (Rus. *shamanshow*) while seeking to keep prospective clients by telling them lies, for instance, convincing them that the client suffered from curses. Indeed, in the wake of Soviet disintegration, the initial concentration and 'resurgence' of shamanic practitioners in the capital underwent, with time, an unexpected disruption. The development of shamanic societies and the proliferation of 'fake' (*shyn eves hamnar*) shamans in Kyzyl has created conflicts and divisions within the scene of shamanic practice. This, in turn, has perpetuated the

feelings of uncertainty and doubt among Kyzylians. Today, there are only three societies in Tuva which continue to offer services. *Dungur* ('Drum'), the oldest one, is situated in the centre of Kyzyl, whilst *Tos Deer* ('Nine skies') and *Adyg-Eeren* ('Bear spirit') are on the outskirts of the city. The process of becoming a member of a society no longer requires tests and training. Instead, it relies simply on verbal confirmation of the future shaman's skills, which only increases the feelings of overall uncertainty concerning shamanic practice.

When I first arrived in Kyzyl, my main aim was to visit one of these shamanic societies. Much to my surprise, numerous requests for any kind of access or help were met with general resentment and a consistent refusal on the grounds of general distrust towards those associated with the shamanic societies. In the end, one of the lecturers from the University of Kyzyl agreed to take me on a brief trip to one of the societies. Nevertheless, she was not sure where it was and we were forced to spend a couple of hours wandering around the streets looking for what I expected to be at least a small villa. We finally arrived at a small wooden house with a big sign indicating that we had reached our destination (see Figure 6.1).

As we entered a small waiting room, there was no trace of a lavish reception desk or the extravagant furniture and decorations I had been told were common in the past. We were asked to go into another room where the chairperson of a spiritual religious organisation, as her business card stated, was occupied with her mobile phone while a little girl was running around her legs. She did not look at us, and we had to wait for a while before she finally greeted us. My friend provided a long introduction, describing who I was and why I was in Tuva. The woman asked me about my date of birth and who my parents were. She defined

Figure 6.1 Shamanic society

my 'aura', gave me her business card and warned me to be vigilant of the shamans' tricky behaviour. We thanked her profusely and moved back to the living room, where I noticed a comprehensive price list, including divination, healing and cleansing rituals, as well as a little cash box guarded by three women sitting around a small table. I was allowed to have a look into a third room where three shamans dressed in fur coats sat at their tables awaiting their clients. The room revealed quite an unusual setting. One of the shamans was blind and kept wobbling. A woman opposite him was wearing sunglasses and had a number of stones in front of her, indicating she was a specialist in reading the future. The man in the back was occupied with carving his shamanic instruments and quietly laughing. The shamans were not willing to speak to me, but gave me their business cards, asking me to phone them in order to make an appointment. We thanked them and moved towards the exit. No one looked at us. My friend asked me if I had seen enough and delicately implied she would not be willing to return.

What in particular triggers my friends' apprehensiveness and apparent disregard for shamanic societies? Apart from the widespread suspicion of greediness, Tuvans are particularly discouraged by the shamans' tendency to exhibit unusual moves, such as a sudden loss of consciousness or rolling eyes, thus reinforcing the idea of 'shaman-show'. While exploring the intricacies of shamanic practice, I have discussed how shamanic efficacy relies heavily on sound, and classic elements of trance-like experiences, such as speaking in tongues or presenting unusual physical moves, are generally absent. Shamans from the societies put particular stress on the performative and technical effectiveness of the shaman's work, including spectacular instances of trance and mediumship that have little to do with the usual conceptualisations of shamanic practice as artistry. The shifts in the characteristics of shamanic practice and in particular the new political and business-oriented agendas advertised by shamanic societies illustrate the process by which the economic situation in Kyzyl emancipated shamanic practice from its contingency on creative interactions with spirits embedded in the efficacy of sounds. Through a strong emphasis on its exhibition value, shamanism offered by societies has become commodified and thus designed for reproducibility whilst disturbing Tuvans' understanding of what shamanic practice is, or should be, about.

Another aspect of shamanic societies that seems particularly disturbing to Tuvans is the fact that there is a fixed price list for each ritual: 'Good shamans never advertise themselves and they will never tell you how much money you have to pay', I was told by one of Hovalygmaa's clients. Many of my Tuvan friends complained about a lack of privacy too: 'There are four tables and fours shamans in one room, there is no intimacy, no possibility to talk about what is important', explained Marina, a Buryat who works at the state university. She admitted that she would visit the societies out of curiosity: 'I went just to see what it was like. They sent me to my shamans in Buryatia and rushed me out, it was not pleasant and left me really confused and anxious'. Another woman, Olga, who runs a small tour guide business for tourists from Europe and North America in Kyzyl, described why she was unwilling to take her customers to the societies:

> You have no idea what you can expect from them. They demand insane amounts of money like ten thousand rubles for a show (approximately one hundred pounds, the highest price for the most complicated death ritual). They are rude and greedy. I have three reliable shamans to whom I always go with our clients. They can tell you something real about shamanism, not this commercial stuff. Otherwise, you can never tell if what they say is true. Very often they just invent all sorts of curses and rituals in order to make sure that you are going to come back and they can make more money.

Interestingly, as Hovalygmaa herself admitted, the shamans in Kyzyl enjoy the fame they have been receiving since the 1990s.

> All researchers and tourists want to meet us and shamans sometimes take advantage of it. If we do not like someone we would just make up stories, tell you things that are entirely not true and then laugh at you behind your back. How are you going to tell what is real or not?

she smiled at me. 'Be careful, shamans often say things out of tiredness or boredom, sometimes fear'. Alexandr, a local musician, also warned me:

> These days they are well educated and familiar with multiple academic texts on shamanism rather than learning from their ancestors or other shamans. They come up with their own theories on what shamanism is and what they are actually doing. They are messing with people and we do not always trust them.

As mentioned earlier, the shamanic societies no longer conduct any tests in order to verify the authenticity of shamanic powers. Affiliation with a society is often based on a verbal assertion that a person has some shamanic skills. Shamanic practice on many occasions becomes a last resort for desperate Tuvans who find themselves in serious economic and financial situations and approach shamanic societies as a possible source of employment. I had an opportunity to discuss this process with one of the local journalists who studied numerous cases of homeless people taken in by the societies. She explained:

> They come in and say somebody in the family was a shaman, they have a calling or they have dreams. In exchange, they get one meal a day and a place to sleep. They do not have to wander around in winter. I know this because I interview them all the time.

In a similar fashion, some people become self-declared shamans simply to make a living. My landlady never really liked shamans and was highly suspicious of their practices. She would always tell me I should drop my research and focus on something that was not an illusion and a lie. This is how she justified her suggestion:

> You know these days anyone can become a shaman. Let me tell you a story. I have a friend who is shamanising. Once, I sat down with her and said:

> 'Masha, tell me honestly, can you see things?' And Masha told me the truth: 'Honestly, Arzaana, I am no shaman. But what am I going to do? My husband left me, I lost my job and I have kids to feed. This is a sure thing these days, I really need the money'.

Such declarations stand in direct conflict with what shamanic practice means to Tuvans and only perpetuate already well-established feelings of uncertainty and distrust associated with shamanic societies.

In opposition to this, there is a network of individually operating shamans, like my friend Hovalygmaa, whose knowledge and practices constituted the heart of this book. These individual shamans do not advertise their work, and they can only be found through trusted friends or neighbours. Their relationships with shamans from the societies are rather tense and often conflictual. Unlike shamans from the societies they do not have business cards and do not seek to advertise their work. This is usually the first indication that the shaman is not an impostor or does not have a business-focused agenda. Money is another factor playing a key role in the assessment of the shaman's good intentions. As was discussed earlier, the role of the shaman includes the perpetual navigation of fluctuating energies which generate and fuel sociocosmic interactions between humans and spirits. This process involves constant elements of reciprocity, and shamans are always expected to receive something, usually financial remuneration, for their work. Nonetheless, a genuine and trustworthy shaman is never expected to ask for a specific amount of money. On a number of occasions, in particular involving foreign clients, I witnessed how the shamans felt unease when directly confronted with questions about how much money they wanted to be paid or whether a given amount was enough. They tended to turn their heads or walk away without providing any answers, leaving irritated clients behind them.[3]

Apart from relative social isolation and the absence of a fixed price list, independent shamans are often characterised by their already well-established reputation and usually, if they have successfully helped a member of a family or a friend, their support will be recommended further. This does not mean, however, that they are always fully trusted. As I have discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, sounds play an important role in verifying shamanic powers and validating the authenticity of their skills. The real shaman is the one who through the means of sounds facilitates intermittent encounters with non-humans which can be also experienced through other senses, such as touch and smell. Interestingly though, Tuvans have also developed an array of smaller 'tests' to which they like to subject individual shamans outside the ritual context. These are not only tests used in order to reconfirm shamanic powers but also to verify how efficient and effective they are. Some of these methods involve testing the shaman's visionary skills through checking if shamans can see through objects and read people's minds. In these cases, clients often tease shamans by asking them, for instance, to describe how many people are sitting behind the walls of the given building. One of the most popular tests involves demanding the shaman to say something that is intimately related to the client's life and that, apart from them, only the dead could know.

Given the deep fear of the dead held by many Tuvans, correct answers usually constitute a very powerful confirmation of shamanic skills and guarantee further recommendations. Moreover, it is very common to conduct a wider comparison of the efficacy of the shamans' work through something similar to a diagnostic test. In these cases, one client decides to visit a number of shamans asking exactly the same question to each. Afterwards, the answers are compared. Their consistent overlapping constitutes a good indication of authentic shamanic skills. The shamans themselves admit that they have to undergo one of the most significant tests: the overcoming of their own ego. If the shaman becomes engrossed by fame and a desire to increase financial income, then within the groups of independent shamans they are disregarded and often ostracised.

Openly displaying financial profit and striving towards fame and recognition trigger tensions and disagreements between individual shamans and shamans affiliated with societies. The distrust displayed by Tuvans towards the more business-oriented practices provided by the shamanic societies also results in a broader distrust towards shamanic work, including independent shamanic practice, as a whole. Furthermore, the 'unauthentic' exercise of shamanic rituals conducted by the societies equally distorts and disturbs perceptions of how shamans should normally operate. This pervaded by the context of distrust and suspicion of relations between shamanic societies, individual shamans and Tuvans in general is one of the examples of 'turbulence' which my friends experience outside of the ritual arena. Another example, which continues to bring together shamans and turbulence beyond the realms of shamanic ceremonies, is the numerous afflictions, such as depression, alcohol addiction and HIV, that affect people, often leaving them either confused or ostracised and thus turning to shamans as the last resort.

Curses of civilisation

Ongoing increase in alcohol addiction was one of the most common issues mentioned by my interlocutors in relation to problematic aspects of life in Kyzyl today. This and similar problems prevailing in many other parts of post-Soviet Siberia (Grant 1995; Pedersen 2011) have been described in Tuva as a form of epidemic which could not be controlled by state institutions and, thus, has become central to shamanic practice (Zorbas 2013, 2021). The ongoing unemployment, poverty as well as unhappy marriages continue to lead to widespread instances of alcohol addiction, which results in further growing violence and suicide among Tuvans. This problem concerns both men and women, although it predominantly affects men with women becoming the main providers and supporters of their family (see Mongush 2006). Regular consumption of alcohol in Tuva was introduced with the beginning of the Soviet Union. Before the Soviets, only male members of the community and those over 40 would drink *araka*, vodka made out of sheep's milk. During numerous rituals I have participated in, alcohol was described to me as a force that overtakes people and which they cannot resist. I was usually provided with vivid descriptions of people who, while suffering from alcohol addiction, were in fact led by the spirits responsible for inflicting the curse. These spirits were

said to encourage people to drink, creating an urge that was beyond one's control. There is an interesting link here between the physical experiences of excessive drinking and the ways in which curses can affect the human body and personhood.

As has already been seen, the ethnographic context of Tuva encourages the notion of personhood to be approached as a wider cosmic project, a distinct cosmocentric structure that involves a set of relations with spirits and the cosmos as a whole. Illuminating the connections between the production of human personhood and cursing, curses introduce disturbance to the victims while moving them from a condition of relatively continual balance to turbulence, a process that becomes materialised through diverse bodily (de)formations. Consequently, the body, rather than a given and static isolated entity, becomes a field of action allowing for the acquisition and production of particular kinds of (cursed) personhood and particular kinds of turbulent sociocosmic dynamics. This uncontrolled turbulence which affects the body that I have described in the context of cursed personhood resembles the bodily reactions in the experiences of heavy intoxication. Both of these conditions usually imply the onset of sudden, erratic behaviour. Both can be seen as the influence of an external force. In cases of alcohol intoxication the amount consumed can be recognised by a number of physical symptoms, such as the smell of the person's breath or baggy eyes. As was seen in Chapter 3, similar signs are sought by shamans when looking for the potential presence of curses. Perhaps, this is why some Tuvan friends would refer to alcohol addiction as a novel curse or a 'curse of civilization' (Rus. *civilizationnaja porcha*). In fact, the early onset of a drinking problem can be removed with the help of a shaman through the curse deflection ritual. More than that, some clients enjoy using a possible weakness for drinking as one of the afflictions they can direct towards their enemies with the help of the shaman. Interestingly, alcohol abuse may also involve the spirits, which can become drunk and aggressive if fed during outdoor ceremonies with vodka rather than tea with milk (the former was a common practice in Soviet times). While heavy drinking usually bears lethal consequences (for example, showing a hangover or being intoxicated at the ritual may result in death), alcohol may also have some beneficial use during shamanic rituals. Occasionally, vodka is carried by shamans as an additional tool aiding the removal of curses, for example, because it can contain harmful energy collected from the client's body as mentioned in Chapter 2.

The striking difference between the experiences of being cursed and suffering from alcohol addiction is the way in which these are generally viewed by the community. While some forms of curses, such as illness or bad luck, may trigger sympathy, people suffering from alcohol addiction are usually ostracised and left to their own suffering. Perpetually drunk and often homeless Tuvans are rarely offered help as their condition is considered too advanced and shameful to the rest of the community. Another kind of disturbance which tends to be referred to as a curse of civilisation is HIV. People affected by HIV often seek help from shamans, while struggling to fully comprehend the causes and implications of their affliction. For example, Hovalygmaa would regularly receive visits from confused clients who, when finding out about their HIV status, demanded curse

deflection rituals. In such cases, she would refer them back to medical doctors while suggesting that certain things cannot be fully confronted by shamans.[4]

Witnessing or suffering from alcohol addiction, the presence of unknown dangers such as the HIV virus and other struggles often connected with these, such us unemployment, can lead to the person suffering from experiences of depression or anxiety. In Kyzyl, there is a growing awareness of different mental health issues, such as depression – another example of what some friends would call *civilizationnaja porcha*. It is shamanic figures who tend to play an important role in supporting their community when it comes to psychological distress. Shamans are often seen by people as the closest to the community – they are the ones who visit clients in their flats and collect stories of people's struggles and suffering. Most importantly, their observations are often taken into consideration by the local authorities and institutions while considering different ways of improving living conditions in the capital. One example is the much-celebrated Father's Day in Kyzyl. It is not only meant to boost men's confidence and self-esteem but also to improve the overall image of the family as strong, stable and healthy. In support of this, some shamans proposed offering a bowl with tea and milk first to a man at the end of each purification ritual (before this, a bowl with tea and milk would be given to a person in the closest vicinity to the shaman). As I had the opportunity to see for myself, this change became a permanent element of the ceremonies. All of these actions, in turn, are meant to prevent ongoing divorces and instances of adultery which often lead to the aforementioned drinking problems, suicides and depression. Another intriguing example constitutes workshops offered by shamans, which focus on diverse ways in which, for example, women can become more confident and less prone to psychological distress. As shaman Hovalygmaa described, during these workshops female shamans can use their make-up skills and costumes in order to instil more power in their audience and convince women to loudly voice, just like shamans, their problems, fears and concerns. In this way, shamans become locally involved activists and social workers for whom counselling and spreading emotional support is as important as facing curses.

The narratives of disturbance and uncertainty that accompany issues such as alcohol addiction and distrust towards shamans point to a kind of experiential symbiosis between curses and everyday life, which allows shamans and turbulence to be considered beyond the immediate context of the ritual. However, this book has been not only about shamanic practice, turbulence and cursing events but also about sound. As mentioned earlier in this conclusion, the powerful use of sounds and the ability to loudly voice things transpires, for example, in the workshops offered by shamans or becomes heavily exasperated during the so-called 'shaman shows' for the purpose of financial profit and tourist entertainment. What happens, though, when sounds are no longer heard?

Technological developments

The second part of this book has focused on a discussion on the potent role of sounds in Tuva and their importance to shamanic work. Sound performances

constitute the centre of shamanic proceedings and become particularly dramatic in the context of cursing rituals. In my discussion, I have looked at sounds as imbued with transformative and communicative potency. Focusing on a variety of instrumental (drums) and human sounds and expressive techniques employed by the shamans, I have proposed that it is through sound that diverse relationships are constituted, experienced and validated in the cursing rituals. Given the growing interest in the theorising of sound and music, I believe that the ethnographic context of Tuva becomes an important contribution to considerations of shamans, spirits and clients as sonic beings. It also allows us to inquire into what sound does and what can become known through and with sound (Feld 2015). In the cursing events that I have described, the shaman Hovalygmaa exercises the art of conjuring the spirits while confronting and reconfiguring sociocosmic dynamics, and thus voicing into being a particular moment of an intrinsically fragile cosmos. Her drum creates what I have called semi-controlled turbulence and unsettles and opens up a given cosmic configuration, allowing the shaman to undertake negotiations with spirits within it. She is further expected to allow the audience to physically encounter the presence of spirits through their senses. Sounds are also, central to an array of Tuvan practices beyond shamanic rituals, such as throat singing, travelling and interactions with the environment. However, what happens when this deeply sounding surrounding which is vital for spirits, shamans, humans, animals and plants becomes changed or damaged through processes like climate change, resource exploitation or infrastructural development? Do the ways of hearing and listening transform? Can sounds be silenced?

The past 30 years have brought a widespread use of the internet, social media and mobile phones to Kyzyl. While these technological tools have been widely embraced by most of the community, their increasing importance has alternated the ways Tuvans interact with spirits and the environment through the senses, including sounds. When I discussed the role of social media in Kyzyl at the Tuvan University, Elena, one of the lecturers, began our conversation by saying: ‘We can’t hear spirits any more’. As she implied, reliance on the internet and mobile services has, to a certain extent, muted Tuvans’ ability to listen to their sounded surroundings and thus interact with spirits in the usual ways. In order to illustrate her point, she referred to the troubling differences between generations:

> Our children are lost in the taiga. The development of technological media ‘cools’ youths’ interests in our ways of living. When confronted with trips to the taiga or the steppe younger generations are lost, confused. They don’t know how to interact with the forest, how to behave. They cannot hear or listen.

Elena also discussed how in the past her relatives, who lived in the remote areas of Tuva, could easily read through the sounds of the environment and employ what she called their intuitive skills in order to, for example, predict the arrival of

unexpected guests. As she suggested, continual use of cell phones and the internet has slowly silenced these abilities, making people rely more on diverse technological devices rather than their sensorial skills.

On the other hand, the internet, mobile phones and social media play a rather different role among shamans for whom, as we have seen, sounds constitute one of the essential means of work. Instead of adversely affecting their ability to engage with sounds, technological devices seem to greatly facilitate administrative and organisational aspects of shamanic work. The possibility to remain connected on a wider scale has become one of the indispensable elements of shamanic practice today, both among individual shamans and shamans from the societies, thus bringing together human and technological media, in particular social media, in an explicit fashion. Mobile phones have become for shamans a portable list of regular clients and allow them to organise their diary more effectively. It is not unusual for shamans to have Facebook pages and Instagram profiles which permit them to establish contacts with wider networks of clients while also exposing certain elements of their own private life. While some of my interlocutors would question lack of face-to-face interaction, considered by many Tuvans as an important aspect of a ritual, some shamans, among them Hovalygmaa, do not find it problematic to conduct certain ceremonies (including cursing rituals) via Skype in order to help people living outside of Tuva. As she explained, the internet allows her to expand her practice and reach further. She only needs to see the image of the room and the client's face in order to be able to use her voice, summon the spirits and undertake adequate negotiations. There is no request for any payment; however, voluntary donations are usually made afterwards via bank transfers. Thus, the widespread reliance on technology, such as phones, tablets and social media, seems, according to some of my interlocutors, to restrain their intuitive skills and distinct ways of interacting with their surroundings based on the extensive use of senses and, in particular, sounds. However, it also facilitates networks of communication between clients and shamans and allows them to move their ritual practices beyond the physical borders of Tuva.

Apart from the growing reliance on certain technologies, another element which triggers some form of disturbance that affects Tuvans' ability to interact with the environment through senses such as sound is infrastructural development. A particularly burning topic constitutes in this case the question of building a railway track from China to Moscow through Kyzyl. As emerged from many of the discussions I held with my interlocutors, the train has become a kind of a symbol of the uncertain future for Tuvans. The possibility of growing industrialisation which comes with diverse infrastructural projects, like high-speed trains, deeply worries many Tuvans and threatens the stability of their community because of what these changes seem to entail. This became evident after I met Tania, one of the students from the University of Kyzyl. One day, Tania and I were walking down the hill near the Yenisei River while discussing her projects, dedicated to spreading the importance and meaning of different rituals conducted in pre-Soviet times among the young generation of Tuvans. Tania explained how she felt confused during a variety of ceremonies, such as *shagaa* (the Tuvan New Year which

usually takes place in February, depending on the Buddhist monks' astrological calculations), which for her was an intriguing yet meaningless combination of actions and sounds. Like many other Tuvan friends, she complained about the conceptualisation of different rituals solely through the prism of academic debates and theoretical ideals, associated with wider political and ethnic processes in Siberia. 'We need some understanding, but among normal people, not at the level of academia or the government', she insisted. She concluded,

> Look, we had two huge leaps. The first, at the beginning of the Soviet Union. The second we are experiencing right now. We are too slow, we have a different understanding of time and space. Soon enough, we are going to be in reservation camps, while the trains pass by with great speed and we are left confused.

The fact that major infrastructural projects are a direct threat to the environment and to the practices of indigenous communities has been clear for a long time. In Tuva, as Tania stressed, continuing industrialisation and urbanisation silences the sounded environment that constitutes an integral part of Tuvan life, whereby the possibilities to hear and interact with non-humans, such as spirits and animals, become interrupted or muted.

Taking all the above together, Kyzyl today has become a platform upon which the diverse elements of everyday life combine and re-combine, producing diverse tensions. Different challenges and processes, such as novel forms of affliction, distrust towards shamanic societies and environmental changes are comprehended by friends and interlocutors through the ideas of disturbances and uncertainty that together produce a kind of uncontrolled turbulence that we have witnessed in the context of curses. In this way, the fabric of everyday life in Kyzyl and the dynamics within it are experienced and talked about in the same way that curses are described and felt. The phenomenon of curses allows us, therefore, to better understand the intricacies of life in Kyzyl at the present. What about the future?

(Un)certain futures

On one occasion, I participated in an intense and difficult ritual conducted in the middle of the deep steppe. I sat in the isolated, small wooden hut where 15 members of the clan were gathered awaiting the ritual. The shaman was trying to prolong the life of a very sick 70-year-old man suffering from post-surgical inflammation.[5] The ritual had a number of dramatic twists, and it was not until the very late evening that the shaman decided it was time to return to Kyzyl. When we got into the car, she pulled a smartphone out of her pocket. 'There is no reception here and I spent a whole day without Facebook', she said clearly irritated in Russian and looked at me, truly concerned. I burst out laughing and asked if she realised that she was a powerful shaman whose skills and strengths could traverse seas and mountains and who just admitted her dependency on social media and the internet. 'I am a shaman of the twenty first century and it is not my Facebook

profile that you should be concerned about', she explained with a smile, and we both laughed as the car slowly drove towards the distant capital.

Indeed, whenever giving a lecture or a presentation on Tuvan shamanic practice I mention the use of social media and Skype as possible ways to inflict or deflect curses, my audience usually welcomes it with excitement and a kind of surprise. Despite quickly growing attention to decolonialism, an image of a shaman with a drum performing mysterious rituals while updating their Instagram profile will come across for many as an intriguing occurrence. As I continue my anthropological work in Siberia, I have recently discussed this point with a Nanai shaman, Leonid, who lives in Far East Russia in the Khabarovsk region, where the Nanai, the Eveny and the Olchi reside. He finds many of the stereotypical images, such as that of a shaman with a drum, that get randomly snatched from indigenous cosmologies (for different political, economic and personal aims) as highly damaging and obscuring what really seems to matter today (this also dovetails with Hovalygmaa's response to my comment regarding her Facebook activity). This is how Leonid expresses his concerns:

> Listen, I don't need to go and drum to find out what weather we are going to have tomorrow. I can Google it. We have different, more pressing issues at stake at the moment. Now, it is time for everyone, not only the Nanai, but also ethnographers, artists, people who have different religions to come together.

Leonid's comment does not show disregard for shamanic practice. Quite the opposite, it actually suggests that in the wake of global issues, such as climate change and environmental crisis (in Siberia visible through, for example, melting permafrost and taiga fires), it is crucial to look at indigenous cosmologies and what they propose more attentively.

Numerous recent anthropological works have highlighted and explored the need for such attentiveness in the wake of the environmental crises (Bodenhorn & Ulturgasheva 2022; Escobar 2020; O'Reily 2020). Within these studies, there are loud calls for new methods, research designs and theoretical frameworks to allow for diverse cosmologies, such as indigenous, scientific and political to interweave while driving international debates on topics, such as climate change. One of these frameworks is the concept of pluriverse which draws attention to 'the practice of a world of many worlds' (Blaser & de la Cadena 2018: 4). Particularly instructive here is the recent work of Escobar (2020) on pluriversal politics. In short, Escobar calls for a new research design, a design which offers a new vision of pluriversal bioregion occupied by multiple worlds. As he writes:

> Design is no longer for experts alone; we all design our own existence, and this applies with even more relevance to communities that are defending their own ways of life (…) The first step would be to create a team and a space for collaborative design with multiple actors, including at least the following: territorial-ethnic organizations, traditional authorities, and communitarian councils; groups of women and young people along the rivers and in the

> cities; academics, intellectuals, and artists; NGOs; the media; and the state. The first job for this group would entail creating a different imaginary of the region than that of the prevalent narrative based on megaprojects, growth, consumerism, trade, 'productivity', development, and so on.
>
> (Escobar 2020: 130)

Echoing Escobar's proposal, other theoretical models on pluriverse encourage exploring 'heterogenous worldings coming together as a political ecology of practices, negotiating their difficult being together in heterogeneity' (De la Cadena & Blaser 2018: 4). Can the concept of pluriverse allow for parsing both theoretical and ethnographic questions around the uncertain futures of indigenous peoples in Siberia? I believe that Hovalygmaa's and Leonid's comments speak to this analytical and methodological model. The way forward is, therefore, to engage with ethnographic compositions which trace 'ecologies of practices' (De la Cadena & Blaser 2018: 4) while exploring the entanglements of worlds and cosmovisions, including indigenous, scientific, political, economic and so on. We can then begin to understand the issue of permeability and mechanisms which encourage or discourage certain practices and thoughts to be more permeable than others (see also Bodenhorn 2012). As the environment changes, so do indigenous cosmologies. Hopefully, the ethnography presented in this book has been strong enough to excite readers not only about the mystery of shamanic worlds and curses but also about the complexity of the context in which shamanic practice takes place today. Perhaps, while looking closer at an array of stories discussed here we can begin to wonder what kind of negotiations take place between different cosmovisions (as concepts of pluriverse encourage us to do) and what is actually negotiated into being. Turning our heads towards (un)certain futures, we can ask whether theoretical models of co-design are doomed to fail or perhaps we can begin to trace certain pockets of 'hope', or 'permeability', while addressing more seriously the calls for more inclusive models of strengthening indigenous worlds.

The final encounter

I spent the last night of my fieldwork in the basement of the Tuvan Cultural Centre with some foreigners who had arrived in Kyzyl in order to improve their throat singing skills. While falling asleep, I listened to them practising, the sound of which constantly intertwined with some distant Tuvan voices. These were the concluding sounds that accompanied the end of my year's adventure. At five in the morning, I walked to the bus station, crossing the empty streets of the city. As the bus drove through the steppe, I noticed the hill where Hovalygmaa and her family had their *ovaa*. We had visited this place only a few weeks earlier. I discreetly waved to it, saying in this way a kind of symbolic goodbye to the city and friends who live in it. As we reached the Sayan mountains, I turned my head and saw how the vast open space with the famous road leading to Kyzyl was disappearing behind me. Soon after, we were driving smoothly through Khakassia, where I met my Russian friends. A day later, I reached Moscow and, before I

knew it, I was at Heathrow airport. While waiting for my flight to Edinburgh, I watched an Italian woman arguing angrily with her partner, about something she clearly struggled to find in her bag. The woman was waving her hands uncontrollably and constantly raising her voice while the man tried to calm her down with an apologetic tone and polite smiles. All of a sudden, curses and Kyzyl no longer seemed that distant.

Notes

1. Victory Day commemorates the Soviet Union victory over the Nazi Germany in the Second World War.
2. On the rare occasions of a student failing, they would usually repeat their training.
3. As it was explained to me, the financial offering depends on the amount of time spent on a consultation as well as the gravity of the problem discussed and the client's financial situation.
4. In Kyzyl, there are networks of cooperation between different practitioners, such as medical doctors, shamans and Buddhist lamas. I have discussed this in full length here (Stelmaszyk 2018).
5. Life expectancy in Tuva is said to be rarely higher than 60 years old. Consequently, as my interlocutors explained, the shamans do not undertake any ritual proceedings concerning people over that age. As they say, if one lives up to 60 years old it implies their life has been filled and should not be unnecessarily prolonged. Nevertheless, in cases of family members and close friends the shamans might make exceptions.

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