STUMBLING AROUND THE SACRED

Some personal observations

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Introduction

One who studies religion must anticipate and learn to accept a few minor occupational hazards. For starters, you have to come to terms with the fact that everyone else is already an expert in what you do. Everyone has an opinion, some story, some experience, or some insight into the sacred. In the field, this remains true for just about everyone except for the laity whom you wish to understand a bit better. While interviewees regularly offer more shrugs than data, everyone else is an endless font of insight and wisdom. Moreover, if you study anything remotely resembling “shamanism” then you’re signing yourself up for getting branded as an expert in it even if you deny that you study it. You also might get the distinct pleasure of bumping into people from Western countries who claim they are shamans. Finally, you might have to grapple with the pressure to show more respect to the sacred than most devout traditional religious people ever would. In what follows, I detail some examples of the aforementioned hazards in hopes of demonstrating that they make this bizarre line of work wonderful, fascinating, and often quite funny, at least in hindsight.

Why I might study religion

There’s something about us – as a species – that seems to compel us to do all sorts of bizarre things in the hopes that some ethereal agent out there cares and does something about it. There are also innumerable debates and empirical projects seeking to unravel what it is about us that fosters commitment to gods (e.g. Bulbulia, 2008; Frey, 2010; Voland and Schiefenhövel, 2009; Watts and Turner, 2014). Neurological and cognitive approaches focus on the mental architecture making religious concepts possible but focus too little on content and behaviour.
Many ecological approaches also minimize content, but make up for it in that they measure benefits that contribute to human sociality and reproduction. And, while cultural approaches might focus on the content of beliefs and rituals, they often lack the kind of methodological and analytical rigour that affords comparative and replicable assessments. What attracted me to anthropology was that its holism appealed to my lack of attention span; I could try to do it all. With so many layers, causal webs, perspectives, and timescales to consider, it’s easy to get lost. And being lost is never dull.

Personally, I find religion to be one of the weirdest things that people do. Since I was a child, I’ve wondered: why bother? For me, the only exciting thing about going to church was pretending lightning was coming down through the ceiling during transubstantiation. That got boring fairly quickly. The rest was an utter chore that made no sense. My parents were sensible enough to let me stop going when I told them as much. Now, I vacillate between stubborn agnosticism and militant atheism. The former rears its noncommittal head when I have to remind myself that I know very little, and, most of the time, I barely understand what people are referring to when they ask if I believe in something. Is there a god? I don’t know, I guess it depends on what you mean. The latter is especially frothy when I read yet another abhorrent thing people do in the name of religion. They’re trying to remove scientific education again? What lunatics!

Like many social systems, religion is rife with interesting conundrums: it’s universal but variable and it seems both inherently conservative and flexible. But religion also has some unique Gordian knots worth chopping. For instance, religious postulates are wildly improbable but their associated behaviours’ effects seem remarkably practical. And, people fluctuate between holding the sacred in ultimate esteem and being fairly lackadaisical towards it, or even institutionalize disrupting its activities. Moreover, it is clearly a phenomenon best assessed with attention to both our biological and social endowments. Professionally, these make the challenge of understanding religious systems quite fun.

Despite flirting with studying topics like chimpanzee cognition, humour, indigenous law, human rights, and philosophy of mind, I could never shake studying religion. At this point in my education, I can’t even deny that I might have some genetic attraction to it. Professionally, I focus on two nagging things about religion: (1) around the world, aspects of religious beliefs and practices seem to mediate human interactions with the natural and social worlds, (2) religion functions like an adaptive technology rather than being some cognitive glitch or an artefact of history. These possibilities inspired me to wrestle the beast of religion. My utter lack of faith in the quality of human inference-making (especially my own) motivated me to be a social scientist who collects and analyses data.

**Luck, fast and dumb**

For the first couple of years of my PhD programme at the University of Connecticut, I hemmed and hawed about where to do fieldwork. I considered doing some work...
in South America until a fellow graduate student lamented how difficult it was to get rid of her parasitic worms. I bombed that section of undergraduate zoology due to an acute case of revulsion. I had early aspirations to work in Indian Country but was never too aggressive about it and the politics involved in working there seemed insurmountable. But my field site would soon present itself.

I’m a serial obsessive, but one constant is my love of music and the general manipulation of sound. I had heard David Hykes and The Harmonic Choir years before, a choir well known for its production of overtones, high frequencies that emerge out of normal vocal tones. One day late autumn, out of a need for a distraction, I got the urge to learn how this remarkable feat was physically possible, so I did a web search on “physics + overtone singing”. I quickly found three things that inspired another obsession: (1) an article that actually addressed the physics of overtone singing (Levin and Edgerton, 1999), (2) a video of an otherworldly example of “Tuvan throat-singing”,1 and (3) the story of physicist Richard Feynman and his editor Ralph Leighton’s attempts to reach Tuva (Leighton, 1991). I vowed to figure out this strange phenomenon myself. For me, it was just another exciting thing to learn about.

During that time, I lived in New Haven and commuted to Storrs, carpooling with two lovely humans who were in the same department. We had a fun, jocular relationship, and we regularly discussed our latest interests. Armed with my latest obsession, on one winter commute I regaled them with all I was learning about overtone singing and revealed it was my plan over winter break to learn how to do it. They encouraged me in typical big-brotherly (i.e. playful and patronizing) fashion. I practised whenever I commuted alone and over break whenever I was home alone (because I love my wife). Soon after, I could belt out a few notes. This was good enough for me; I was more interested in learning how it worked than in perfecting the art.

The first day back from break, my two carpool companions and I got into the car. One, in his inimitable style said: “So, Ben. How’s the throat-singing coming along?” I said, “I can do a little.” What I hadn’t anticipated was doing it towards a windshield in a full car effectively harnesses the overtone back into your face. I think we were all a little surprised (for different reasons, perhaps); they immediately said “You should do your fieldwork in Tuva! They’d get a kick out of that!” My immediate response was: “Well, I don’t study music, and I guess that’s what they’re known for.” But I looked further and quickly realized it was ideal for a lot of what I’ve been interested in: a post-Soviet colony with an ethnic majority undergoing a cultural renaissance. And it’s the only polity on earth with “shamanism” as an official religion. And they have weird music. And they have revitalized their language. It was a no-brainer! I quickly collected everything I could on the region and committed to try to get there.

I started tracking down researchers who worked in the area and received supremely helpful emails. I contacted a Tuvan ethnomusicologist to enquire about working there, who extended a very enthusiastic invitation to the Republic. It was on. Soon after, I ploughed into my adviser Rich Sosis’ office and said: “I think I’d
like to go to Tuva.” In reference to Feynman and Leighton’s adventure, he said “Cool! Tuva or Bust! Don’t forget about that grant application.” There was a call for grant applications for Oxford University’s “Cognition, Religion and Theology Project” organized by Justin Barrett, a leader in the field of the cognitive science of religion. I hadn’t originally intended on applying for a few really bad reasons: (1) I’m nobody, (2) I would have to figure out a budget, and (3) the deadline was fast approaching. Because he was an excellent adviser, Rich responded (I’m liberally paraphrasing): (1) true, but that’s a terrible reason not to apply, (2) that’s life, and (3) then you’d better get to it.

So, despite being a nobody with more excuses than time, I drafted a proposal and we went through a few drafts together, managing to submit it by the deadline. A few days later while on campus, I found out that this nobody with too little time was awarded full funding to pursue a dream concocted just a few months prior. The grant wound up paying for four field trips that would firmly plant me on the path I now find myself. When I got home that day, I excitedly told my wife: “Sweetheart, we’re going to Tuva!” She replied: “What’s that?”

**Studying the sacred**

**What does a key informant unlock?**

Again, part of my attraction to Tuva was it was clearly in the midst of a cultural renaissance; with the Soviet system largely behind them, they were making their marks on the global music scene with throat-singing (Levin, 2006), they were publishing books in the Tuvan language, and virtually half the population consisted of reindeer, camel, or horse-riding herders, and they were Buddhist-anitimist-shamanists free to express their traditions. It’s really inspiring that a broke, post-Soviet region has not only maintained its traditions, but proudly harnessed and adapted them. One example of this expression is the Tuvan music scene, full of festivals and events that are perfect for getting a lot of people from all over the republic to answer all sorts of inane questions about spirits.

At one of these festivals, I was introduced to an individual through a mutual acquaintance whom I trusted completely, but I had already heard of her reputation as a top-notch, experienced, on-the-spot translator. After discussing my focal questions, we began our trial run of interviews. She was remarkably adept in grabbing people when I would have just shuffled around, red-in-cheek; recruitment was effortless and random. Despite this major asset, I quickly realized that these adjectives also adequately summarized her editorializing during the interview process.

I’m not sure how ubiquitous it is, but I’ve noticed a kind of modesty when engaging with traditional people while in Talking about Sacred Things Mode. In this mode, some folks end sentences with a ritualized “They say” or “So it is said.” Tuvans also often did this. This strikes me as an institutionalized form of demonstrating the suspension of one’s ideological commitment to things. Whether or not...
it functions that way generally is another question. There’s something rather modest, though, about acknowledging that a big part of one’s belief system is trans-generational gossip. Charles Eastman (Santee Dakota) characterizes the American Indian traditions as “a mingling of history, poetry, and prophecy, of precept and folk-lore” (1980). In Tuva, I would regularly ask people if they believed the spirits are out there. A very common reply was a shrug, with an appeal to the ancestors’ practices; that’s what our ancestors said and did, so that’s what we do.

In contrast, this translator’s style immediately struck me as noteworthy; this is someone who wants what she says to be taken as representative. “The spirits don’t care about litter”, she would say, “that is what we believe.” During our practice run with the interview, she made many sweeping statements about “Tuvans believe X” and “we do Y”. This wasn’t uncommon there, but it was curious to me just how confidently she expressed these views: “The spirits never harm, hurt, or punish people, they only protect them.” In my experience out of the field, it is prudent to proceed with caution when someone claims or signals that their view is the view, especially if you value your own independence of thought.

One of my areas of interest is the role gods play in our moral behaviour. Not all gods are purported to care about morality. The cultural anthropologist in me asks: How can religion contribute to treating other people nicely if a god doesn’t care about it (Purzycki, 2010)? The cognitive scientist in me often responds: Why does it matter? If a god is thought of using the same mental systems used for making sense of humans, they probably trigger moral cognition anyway (Purzycki et al., 2012). The evolutionary ecologist in me asks: Why does that even matter? What matters is behaviour and how that translates into mutualistic relationships (Purzycki and Arakchaa, 2013). The point of conveying all of this is that I was asking about people’s specific beliefs, while trying not to prime them with concerns of morality.

During our interviews, my translator would start by asking participants: What do the spirits care about? What pleases them? What angers them? This was perfect until – during interviewees’ throat-clearing – she would interrupt with what became the inevitable and immediate follow-up: They don’t care about how we treat each other right? They’re not like Jesus Christ who cares about being good and bad, right? They don’t care about litter and stuff like that, right?

If it weren’t made clear enough in my training, this hit an important point home for me: the reason why we use reproducible methods is precisely because relying on ourselves and a handful of “expert” informants is woefully inadequate for many of the questions in which we’re interested. While I knew I would ultimately employ more systematic data collection methods, the problems with relying on “key informants” (see Bernard, 2011: pp. 150–152) were only crystallized. Later I collected and analysed ethnographic data that systematically asked participants to list what pleased and angered the spirits (Purzycki, 2016). The most salient thing that my sample claimed angered the spirits? Littering. Do spirits punish? Yes. Are Tuvans more inclined than not to claim that these spirits know and care about how
we treat each other? Yes (Purzycki, 2013). If we go by the assumption that cultural consensus is cultural “truth” (Batchelder and Anders, 2012), my translator was simply wrong. In my view, her confidence made her error all the weightier, particularly when it came to adding her own confounding flourishes to the open-ended qualitative interviews.

While this authoritative confidence needed tempering in the interview process, she was unquestionably helpful in recruitment. Without her, I would have conducted far, far fewer interviews, made fewer connections, and not been able to appreciate the region nearly as much as I did. Confident, gregarious people can be wonderful recruiters as they are relatively less reluctant to engage with others, and not sheepish about taking others’ time. Indeed, they enjoy it! I suspect, however, that if they are to pursue science, a necessary regime of training, training, and once again training is absolutely necessary to temper such inveterate auto-insertion and self-promotion. As in most contexts, the loudest and most loquacious speak first, often, and last. How else are they to sell their wares?

On qualifications and authenticity

On my most recent trip, I was at the Üstitii Xüree festival, an international music festival in Tuva organized to raise funds to rebuild the Buddhist temple that the Soviets destroyed. Given Tuva’s association with shamanism and polyphonic throat-singing, it attracts seekers of all sorts, many of whom are all too quick to signal their oneness with the cosmos and/or seek out a shaman to give them a certificate of authenticity proclaiming they, too, are shamans. On one day, right in the centre of the camp, stood a white man with red dreadlocks, arms outstretched, apparently praising the magnificence of a beautiful double-rainbow. He stood for a very, very long time, completely taken by this moment. Of course, since he was standing in the centre of the circular area (which didn’t actually afford him the best view of the spectacle), anyone near the centre had to see him in all of his worshipping glory. I was waiting for the moment when his outstretched arms gave when a Tuvan friend of mine – a fairly devout Buddhist and shamanist – snuck up behind me. I knew he was at the festival, but we weren’t camping together. He leaned in close to my ear and whispered, “Someone should tell that guy that rainbows are only sunlight shining through the water in the air.”

Years ago, there was a concerted effort among scholars of American Indian issues to expose “white shamans” for what they were: culturally misappropriating frauds who charged fees for their shamanic wisdom (e.g. Churchill, 1996; Hobson, 2002; Rose, 1992). As an undergraduate, I read some of these works, and they successfully cultivated a sense of indignation in me. This kind of thing still bothers me, but now that I’ve had to dip my toes into the murky waters of the New Age movement while plunging into studying a traditional religion first-hand, I recognize that it’s complicated. When I was an undergraduate, this kind of fakery bothered me because it was deceitful and predated upon people who
clearly felt they needed something by exploiting an already vulnerable population. As I got older, I could appreciate a shaman’s perspective a little more; I imagine it might be a little frustrating to have spent your entire life studying something and working hard to live up to the expectations of that position only to have outsiders turn up feeling entitled to the same credentials without having done the requisite homework. But more recently, and from the perspective of someone just trying to make sense of how people deal with the divine, I appreciate such outsiders are often just doing their awkward best to get closer to it than I’m willing to.

In an early excursion out of Kyzyl, the capital city of Tuva, I shared a van with some other foreigners on their way to a throat-singing festival. We were hosted by a bigwig at the Ministry of Culture who went with us along with her driver. I sat in the passenger seat in the front next to the driver. He and I hit it off immediately and I learned a great deal of Tuvan from him. In addition to my wife and some Japanese and Russian throat-singing enthusiasts, there were two Europeans – a man and a woman – who were on a “shamanic journey”. The man seemed to be the typical guru type; predatory but insecure, long bleached hair with skin tanned to a strange plum purple. The woman might have been under his tutelage, but I’m not entirely sure. When they weren’t complaining, they picked on the way people ate, they criticized “fake” shamans, talked endlessly about the “shaman’s way”, and were remarkably unconcerned with anyone or anything other than their quest.

Throughout the landscape of Inner Asia, many sacred places are marked with cairns and/or Buddhist stupas that are clear and present targets of devotional practices. These appear along roads as well. Initially on this trip, we stopped at these sites only occasionally. This was great, we were all getting a sense of the place, experiencing how the two Tuvans in our caravan worshipped, and taking welcome breaks on the side of mountains. Eventually, however, the two “shamans” started demanding we stop at every one, which meant stopping about every thirty minutes on a trip that would have taken about three or four hours normally. This sullied the experience mostly because they would perform some small ceremony or proceed to take a walk or scale a small hill while the rest of us would wait for them. And to top it all off they would engage in their version of throat-singing which was considerably screamier than what I was used to hearing.

Largely due to these breaks, we arrived hours after the sun went down. We were then shuffled into the community centre’s main room and sat down at the table reserved for guests of honour. I’m generally allergic to being in the spotlight, so at this point I was red in the face, speechless, and a bit overwhelmed. Eventually, there were speeches and we all participated. When the European shamans got up to the microphone, they told the village in all sincerity that they came to Tuva to have a “shamanic journey”. Upon hearing this, the translator turned to me and asked me what that was! I shrugged. They continued for a while until – glory be to all that is sacred and holy in the universe – the woman performed an ear-splitting ritual performance. People looked at each other awkwardly. Some winced. It lasted a very long time.
I learned later in that trip that for the rest of their time in Tuva, these two shopped around until they finally found someone to give them a certificate authenticating their status as shamans. While writing this chapter, I looked them up online. The woman pitches herself as a shamaness – “the voice of shamanism” in her home country in fact. The man does much of the same, though with a more diverse repertoire of traditions to sell. They both sell CDs, conduct seminars and workshops, even ones about healing sexual issues! Hearing her voice while suffering from a sexual dysfunction is probably a bit like rubbing your arthritis in nettles; you stop worrying about the original source of suffering by focusing on the novel, burrowing pain.

And, the shamaness’ website notes that she has a “shamanic work permit from Russia!” To think that I was in Tuva when she earned it! To put this into perspective, you can get a certificate for just about anything there. A friend of mine purchased his “computer programming” credentials directly from the person who prints official certificates. At the time, this friend could barely navigate email. For the throat-singing festival during which I met these shamans, my wife and I both earned diplomas (see Figure 2.1) for “active participation” even though we did nothing for it other than pay a fee (and I spent the entire time interviewing people outside while she listened to throat-singing at all levels of professional investment). Upon seeing my diploma, a friend of mine smiled and remarked that “Russia likes its paper”. They’re not the only ones.

Relax, it’s only sacred

Being a non-religious and scientific cultural anthropologist who studies religion has its pressures. In anthropology, we learn/teach the virtues of cultural relativism: “Don’t judge, understand.” Because I study religion, I often felt that I had to be extra careful about making sure I wasn’t saying and doing the wrong things around participants. My strategy now is to do my best not to be disrespectful behaviourally while internally remaining completely bewildered by the fact anyone is actually entertaining the possibility spirits and gods are out there. In some cases, this means I take the sacred way too seriously. I mean, it’s the sacred.

Rappaport (1999) holds the “essence of the sacred … is unquestionableness” (p. 344). However, in many of the world’s traditions, humour is an integral part of religion. Ritual clowns disrupted ceremonies, “fomented anxiety, denial, distortion, and avoidance in their onlookers. They personified disorder, deviancy, contrariness, and unpredictability” (Lewis, 1990: p. 141). Cross-culturally, mythological tricksters and fools are often held to have been responsible for language, fire, and important rituals that make humans what they are (Hyde, 1998). In many articulations of indigenous traditions, then, the sacred is a domain of creativity, disruption, and change. The sacred isn’t unquestionable, it’s the source – and target – of novelty. While Tuvans don’t have such tricksters in their pantheon, there were many moments I had there that suggested to me they might consider getting one.
Stumbling around the sacred

Shamans are people too

The curious thing about the study of shamanism is it almost always focuses on shamans in their roles as shamans. Similarly, religious studies scholars study religious leaders and texts. It’s curious because what makes any social system possible is much, much more than the titular figureheads. Spiro et al. (1987) remarked “it is certainly a strange spectacle when anthropologists, of all people, confuse the

FIGURE 2.1 Diploma of (active participation in) throat-singing (competition). Image provided by the author, who did nothing to earn it. Notice the bald eagle, a species with a range limited to North America.
teachings of a philosophical school with the beliefs and behaviour of a religious community” (p. 194). Contemporary cognitive scientists of religion characterize this discrepancy as “theological incorrectness” (Barrett, 1999; Slone, 2004). But the same goes for any leaders in religious “schools” or traditions; they’re probably leaders because they have something that separates them from the laity. As such, we should also not confuse the thoughts and dispositions of organizations’ leadership with the organization itself.

While I met enough of them for a minimal sample size for succinct study, I only interviewed a few shamans – two in any real depth. I have attended quite a few ceremonies, but my focus was always on the laity’s reception, knowledge, and inferences about their traditions. I quickly learned, though, that shamans clearly drew from a vast repository of information that qualified them as “specialists”. The laity didn’t specialize in this fashion, despite hearing myths and stories. In other words, the universe from which shamans drew their inspiration was rich, remarkably well-defined, and beyond the immediate grasp of the laity. In fact, the gulf seems so wide it’s amazing to me a tradition like shamanism – and its academic study – is so often pitched as contingent on these figures while completely ignoring their clients.

One shaman mapped out her take on the shamanic worldview for me, including a great discussion of its interconnected realms and many beings. One of these was

FIGURE 2.2 Shamanic order patiently waiting for member (left) to adjust headdress. Photo taken by author in Kyzyl, Tyva Republic.
“Kurbustu-Khan”, the governor of the Upper World. While writing my dissertation, I learned that this term is derived from the Manichaean “Hormusta” (or Persian Ahura Mazdā), introduced to the region during the Uighur Empire lasting between CE 744 and 840 (Foltz, 2010; Heissig, 1980; Le Bosquet, 1912; Zhou, 2001).

There’s something remarkable and wonderful about a shaman in southern Siberia introducing you to an otherwise unremarkable term only to later find out it’s tied to the proto-Christian wisdom tradition of Persia introduced to the region around 1,500 years ago. Curiously, in one study (Purzycki and Holland, in press), I found that out of a sample of twenty-six Tuvans who listed all the deities and spirits they could think of, only one listed this deity, despite him being the top dog in the Upper World hierarchy.

Compare this to the Buddhist lama–laity dynamic. Most Tuvans consider themselves Buddhist, but the Buddha is typically thought of as a god who punishes people for immoral behaviour. I asked a monk just how prevalent this belief was and he replied nearly everyone in the republic believed this. He characterized it as a form of “spiritual illiteracy”. Considering people refer to monks as teachers there, my assistant at the time asked him whether or not monks try to correct it, and his reply was that monks didn’t see it as their responsibility to accurately convey the doctrine!

We also never really hear about the backstage goings-on of sacred theatre. While popular perception insists that monks are supremely graceful, enlightened beings who have some deeper insight into reality than we normal people do, like most humans, they have their crutches too. I was part of a ceremony sanctifying a bit of land in the taiga. Hours later, the presiding monk and I were sitting on the side of a hill and he asked if I wanted any snuff. Do I? I thought. I held out my hand and he poured out a little pile. I snorted it happily, relishing the moment of snorting powdered tobacco on the side of a southern Siberian mountain with a Buddhist monk. After his dose, he explained to me it helps sharpen your thinking. I replied I completely understood, and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. I offered him one and with a surprised look, he declined: “Lamas don’t smoke.”

As for shamans, despite what their public personas (and scholarly portraits) would suggest, no amount of magic can free a shaman from a stuck zipper. Once, I was waiting for a friend in the capital city of Kyzyl in a back-alley lot. As I was sitting outside waiting for him, a group of people came out of the building next door with a few chairs and bundles. As they unwrapped the bundles, it became clear that they were a shamanic order getting ready for a ceremony. I continued to smoke, listening to their bickering and banter. One was especially punctilious about his headdress, adjusting it for maximal comfort (Figure 2.2) while the rest were laughing and teasing each other.

Another episode happened during a friend’s family’s annual sanctification ritual out in the woods. This was an all-day affair, and I was supremely humbled and honoured to be there. I initially felt a little out of place, but the family welcomed me with the kind of hospitality that Tuvans pride themselves on. During the height of the ceremony, we were sitting solemnly around the altar. Some folks had
their hands together, heads bowed, and the only thing we could hear was the shaman’s drum and her calls to the spirits. The scent of burning juniper filled the air and the entire affair was intoxicating and relaxing. Part of some shamans’ accoutrements are horsewhips. Near the end of ceremonies while everyone is in the midst of a trance-like state induced by the steady rhythm of the drum, shamans will lightly whip each individual on the back, startling them out of their trance. As I was early in the rotation, I got to watch everyone else get whipped back into the ceremony. Soon, the shaman approached a child, who was remarkably relaxed and quiet for the entirety of the ceremony. The shaman lightly tapped him with the whip. The shocked little guy looked around at everyone with a face that conveyed What the hell did I do? after which he proceeded to cry with righteous indignation. We all doubled-over in laughter. When the shaman finished up, she looked at me with a twinkle in her eye and whispered “That sure was fun.”

**My rebirth**

With some newfound friends, my wife and I had ascended an especially sacred mountain in central Tuva during my first trip there (see Figure 2.3). One of them was quite proficient in English, and we were getting a sense of how feasible a long-term working relationship would be. She repeatedly referred to the mountain as...
we were climbing as a "sacred mountain," and I would try to speak Tuvan. I kept referring to it as a "holy mountain," but I said it was holy. Confusion. I replied in English: "Well, in English, there's not really that much of a difference between 'sacred' and 'holy.' Is there in Tuvan?" She replied: "No, in Tuvan it's called "üttüg khaya," a holy mountain … as in, a mountain with holes."

There was a cave through one of the peaks. In fact, I was the only one in our group who had completely missed that going through this hole was the entire purpose of climbing the mountain. Before I could embarrass myself further – she must have seen some follow-up questions on the tip of my tongue – she noted we were almost to the cave. The cave itself was remarkable. People had wedged wishes written on paper into its walls, and the floor of the tunnel had dolls, toy houses and horses, passports, among other things. A door in the wall (one hole) was a small passage another hole about three feet above the floor. It twisted and turned a little, but if you successfully climb through this passage, Tuvans say, you are a good person and you get your wish. I said: "There's no way I can get through here." My wife quickly went ahead and climbed through without a problem. She goaded me into trying, so I did. It wasn't the most comfortable thing I've ever done but it was manageable. Imagine pulling yourself out of a rock crevice trying to pull your leg first – on to a scree path about a foot-wide hanging over the side of a southern Siberian mountain. I was managing until I was almost out, and my shoe got wedged in between two rocks. I couldn't pull my leg around or reach down because one-third of my body was in a stone crevice with the other two-thirds hanging over the scree. I couldn't move my leg and partly because I was wearing boots designed to stay on my feet in all conditions. Shallow me thought "Oh shit, they're all going to think I'm a bad person now." Thankfully, my wife ran back around and pulled my foot out of the hole. I escaped, wondering about our friends' verdict: "You're a good person … with a little help from your wife."
have much with us, but we did have some dried apricots, so we put some on the
altar for the local spirits of the mountain. Almost immediately, small eagles dived
down, brushed us with their wings, grabbed the apricots, and disappeared around
the other side of the mountain. It was the first time I’d ever witnessed a prayer of
mine unquestionably and directly addressed by an external agent. My vocabulary
and writing style simply cannot convey how beautiful this moment was. I was
thrilled. “Was that the spirit of the mountain?” I asked, childlike in my wonder-
ment. My friend looked at me straight in the eyes with a curious expression and
said, “Uh, nope. That was a bird.”

Conclusion

Through a series of bumbling manoeuvres, I have managed to study the sacred
professionally. In my field site, I learned to appreciate a far, far more relaxed view
of it than I did when I arrived. After years training and studying in a climate of
political correctness and the perpetual encouragement and training in cultural
sensitivity, it’s not entirely surprising I would be so sheepish about talking about
spirits and rituals with people trying to re-establish their post-Soviet identities.
When I got to Tuva, my trepidation was met primarily with warmth, humour, and
courage to do my work without worrying too much. Whenever I asked how
my research could be of some use, people were happy to know that someone was
documenting how people thought about their traditions. If anything, I worried too
much and overshot just how careful I needed to be. I have to admit to feeling
sheepish about, for instance, getting invited to a family’s ceremony and going
around counting their offerings, measuring their BMI (body mass index), and
assessing how this all might be related to social cohesion. Though, in hindsight,
I’m pretty sure that it would have been just fine.

If there are some lessons to be learned in all of this, I submit that they are more
general than specifically applicable to navigating the sacred. One is that if you
really want to make sense of anything – especially something as elusive as the
sacred – confidence is the mating call of the foolish. In his contrast of those search-
ning for the origins of humankind and those dismissive of the quest, Darwin (1871)
observed that “ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge”
(p. 18). Similarly, commenting on the assuredness of Douglas MacArthur and
Joseph Stalin, Bertrand Russell laments that “One of the painful things about our
time is that those who feel certainty are stupid, and those with any imagination and
understanding are filled with doubt and indecision” (1961: p. 694). Whether you’re
a scientist or a committed believer, there is wisdom in these refrigerator magnet
aphorisms. In a related sense, it is also a mistake to conflate the sacred – however
construed – with the stern, strict, and serious. I certainly wasn’t the only one clums-
ily bouncing around religious terrain. I’d go so far as to say that it’s nothing if not
rife with disorder and chaos. It can be quite welcoming and accepting too; the
divine delightfully allows dilettantes and professionals alike to participate in the
fumbling comedy that is Trying to Figure It Out. From know-it-all cultural liaisons
and know-nothing anthropologists to the laity and shamans both ersatz and real, we’re all magnetized by the divine, its representation, and others who share our lunatic curiosity.

Acknowledgements

In addition to helping free my feet, my wife Jessica McCutcheon deserves general thanks for accepting my long absences in the field and while I was in residence as a postdoc. Many thanks go to her for edits and suggestions on this chapter. All of my Tuvan assistants and friends deserve unending thanks as well for keeping my feet on the ground while in the field. The bulk of these experiences are drawn from memory, so some (many? most?) details are most certainly incorrect. I have also purposely altered or left out details for narrative purposes and to ensure that events and people — including myself — were not presented in nearly as silly a manner as they actually were.

Questions for reflection

1 In the field, the line between the personal and professional blurs. In practical terms, what does “respecting others’ traditions” actually mean? Is there a general model regarding its implementation?

2 What are your views on cultural appropriation? Is it a problem that cultural anthropologists are uniquely poised to address? Should they? If so, why and how ought they?

3 The author describes his own spiritual “rebirth” only to end it with a crude, earthly statement. What is the stylistic or rhetorical intent?

4 In the conclusion, the author warns about excessive confidence. How does this warning relate to the chapter’s vignettes and the parties involved in them? How does it relate to convictions more generally in science, religion, and politics?

Notes


2 I’m proud to say that I’ve since gone through it on my own. But honesty compels me to note that there were rumours of a woman who — prior to my second visit — had to get surgically removed by widening the canal a bit.

3 Note that in telling this story years later to another group of Tuvans, one woman interrupted me before the punchline, and excitedly said “That was the spirit-master of the mountain! What fortune!” I replied that I’d been told it was just a bird, to which she replied that the spirit was acting through the bird. Fair compromise.

References

52 Benjamin Grant Purzycki


