Charles Stépanoff


Stépanoff’s book is a 413-page erudite monograph in French, which takes the original approach of combining cognitive and pragmatic approaches, ethno-graphic and historical data to seek explanations for the ‘robustness’ of the shamanic phenomenon in the Siberian Republic of Tuva (p. 13). The book opens with an anecdote of the author asking an expert Tuvan hunter, ‘What is a soul?’, to which the hunter replies that ‘simple people’ like him don’t know; only shamans do (p. 11). While the hunter’s answer seems unsurprising, Stépanoff uncovers how this apparently banal deference towards specialists is nothing but self-evident in a context where shamanism has been submitted to a long period of severe repression, where most shamans now live in the capital city far from the traditional ecosystem of shamanism and where people have always suspected the existence of ‘fake shamans’.

Chapter 1 brings to the fore important historical changes: the presence of shamans in an urban context and the institutionalisation of shamans. The reader is taken to Kyzyl, the Tuvan capital, which, with its three shamanic associations offering set-price services to their clients, is the hub of the shamanist revival that emerged in the 1990s. By uncovering the conflicts and instability which characterise shamans’ relationships across and among institutions, Stépanoff shows that, despite its institutionalisation, the antagonistic singularity of shamans is a structural aspect of Tuvan shamanism. As was the case before the communist period, healing people remains the main activity of shamans; the nature of misfortune has changed, however. In Chapter 2, the author argues that the contemporary epidemic of curses is explained by converging factors: (a) life in a sedentary urban setting; (b) the post-Soviet scientific caution towards the occult; and (c) the power newly conferred to women. Detailed descriptions of consultations show how shamanic cures operate by ‘duplicating’ their client’s problem on a symbolic plan upon which the shaman’s actions will take effect. This constitutes the first difference between simple people and shamans, the latter having access to an instantiation of reality that ‘simple people’ do not.

Having described the setting and conditions of contemporary shamanism, Stépanoff goes on to interrogate how people conceive of shamans. He shows that ordinary people typically think of shamans as holding inborn and inalterable qualities manifested by singular physical traits and inherited from some...
shamanist ancestry. The social status of shamans as specialists is thus thought of as the product of underlying physical properties: it is an essentialised category. The author originally suggests that profane scepticism is both a result of this essentialised conception—because it is impossible to know directly whether one is or is not a shaman—and a mechanism which supports the continuous production of shamans in Tuva, because it offers a causal schema which allows ‘simple people’ to operate inferential procedures of verifications (Chapter 3). The author goes on to present such procedures by describing the narratives of ordinary people about the signs and events that lead to the identification of a shaman as shaman. In people’s narratives, the conjoint identification of atypical physical traits and early psychological illnesses converge towards the social recognition of shamans. Turning to shamans’ own narratives, the author highlights that, where profanes insist on essential traits, shamans tend to give more importance to their relationships with spirits (eeren). Common to ordinary people and shamans is the idea that one can never learn to be a shaman (Chapter 4). To be a shaman is nevertheless a social status; the fabric of this status is the object of the next two chapters.

Stépanoff describes how the person recognised as being born with the appropriate ‘essence’ becomes a shaman through the acquisition of ritual accessories: a drum and a costume. By assenting to go through this ritualised process, a shaman identifies with people’s discourse that singularised him/her as non-ordinary, while these very objects make his/her status also fundamentally relational by publicly materialising his/her relationships with spirits (Chapter 5). The author then shows how the intrinsic porosity of shamans’ bodies allows them to mediate and to circulate energies. For ‘simple people’, this circulation mainly operates between ordinary men and shamans; for shamans, their physical porosity is scaffolded and mediated by the drum and costume, and helps them to bridge fluxes of forces that cross visible and invisible domains of reality (Chapter 6).

Chapter 7 constitutes the apex of Stépanoff’s argument on essentialism and is the most theoretically engaging chapter. The author demonstrates how cognitive hypotheses can be heuristically mobilised to bring out the inferential procedures and implicit knowledge that contribute to the continuous social production of shamans in Tuva. He also shows how anthropologists are well placed to discuss cognitive theories critically, and this without having to conduct experimental tasks. The author tackles a paradox raised at the end of Chapter 3: how can shamans be perceived as singular individuals while also belonging to the same essentialised social category? Stépanoff highlights that Tuvan people’s expectation that each shaman differ from others in their practice, style and innate capacity, hardly accommodates Boyer’s (1990) or Atran’s