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Rohozinski, J.

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Healing and Foretelling Practices in Azerbaijan

JERZY ROHOZINSKI

Practices related to gifted persons and their gift, *vörki*, were hardly explored within Soviet ethnography, and when they were, they were considered 'quackery' in the context of 'irrational' practices of 'popular medicine' as opposed to 'rational' uses of herbs and minerals.¹ Moreover, during the Soviet period people conducted their activities in secret out of fear of being persecuted for propagating superstitions and charlatanry.

The notion of *vörki* may be seen as proof of the endurance of 'popular Islam' in the post-Soviet era, but the 'official'/'popular' dichotomy concerning Islam often appears to be meaningless, as is true in the case of *vörki*. 'Gifted' mullahs, for instance, exist; Islamic clergy is not 'gifted' *ex officio* but it happens that some of them receive the 'gift'. One mullah from Ashkhabad, who had a 'very strong gift' for rainmaking, was well educated and fluent in Arabic. In another example an alumni of an Islamic college in Saudi Arabia had the 'gift' of soothsaying by use of pages from the Qur'an. Adversely, a 'gifted' woman showed me a picture of a mullah whom she was healing. Local tradition says that Mirmovsum ät-Agha, the most famous *seyyid* in the Soviet period, had the ability to heal.² Nevertheless, many of those who are highly educated in religious matters are sceptical and point to verses in the Qur'an and *hadith* that condemn foretelling and divination. Especially the local Muslim intelligentsia is uneasy about such 'superstitious' practices.³

It is believed that a 'gift' is inherited and not to be learned. The 'gift' may be strong or weak: an example of a weak 'gift' is the ability to remove a fear by applying burning pieces of cloth to the skin. Such a 'removal' of fear, called *chidlag*, is transmitted from generation to generation by way of either the feminine or the masculine lineage (women attend only women and men only men) and is regarded as an inheritance of secret knowledge. No distinction between mental and physical disease as such is made; rather, one broad category of 'internal' diseases may be healed by the gift. Nobody visits 'gifted' persons in the case of toothaches or eye problems, which are considered 'external'.

The 'gift' can only be received 'from on high', from holy persons – very often Shi'i imams, who are considered to be closer to God. The concept of *vörki* parallels that of *hörmət* ('veneration', 'respect'), the relationship connecting someone of low rank in the social hierarchy with someone of high rank. *Hörmət* manifests itself in a sacrifice to a saint or traditional offering (*nizar*) to a *seyyid* but also in payments made to policemen and other state officials as a token of respect to those situated closer to the authorities.

The function of broker taken up by those who are 'gifted' is rather ambivalent. A 'gifted' person who has gained personal wealth is regarded with distrust, but this does not stop him/her from having many clients. Professional foretellers and healers are credited when everything they say proves correct, but there are also complaints about tricksters. The prevalent view is nevertheless that the proper attitude is to give a gift in order to show *hörmət* to some extent.

Shamanism and other analogies

A number of concepts connected with the notion of the 'gift' suggest a certain analogy to shamanism. It is believed that those who are 'gifted' recognize one another. The place where someone obtained the

On the Apsheron Peninsula of Azerbaijan, in particular in the so-called 'green belt', regarded by many as a stronghold of traditional Shi'i religiosity, including such small towns as Nardaran and Mashtaga near Baku, the concept of having the 'gift' (*v rki*) of healing and telling the future has remained part of popular belief. *V rki* is obtained from Shi'i imams and other holy people by means of dreams.

'gift' has special significance and it is called *odzhag* (which also means fire, a house of a saint, and a part of wall covered by holy pictures). An *odzhag* is visited by ghosts that are afraid of people but that show themselves to and talk with the 'gifted'. It is believed that there is no escape from the 'gift' and that, at first, it generates suffering and illness comparable to shamanistic illness and initiation dreams of 'called'

shamans in the Turkic traditions.⁴ There are some ecstatic elements in healing similar to practices of dervishes (*mersiyye-khane*), who utter laments for Imam Hussein's death and then fall into a trance, speaking through crying and gesticulating emotionally.

The world of the 'gift' and the 'gifted' fits well into post-Soviet syncretism. In Baku, Russian Orthodox and Jewish foretellers 'consult' each other: a Jewish woman may very well visit a 'gifted' Muslim girl for help with marriage problems. Walls of houses of Muslims are covered not only by pictures of the Shi'i imams but also by Orthodox icons. On the bookshelves the Qur'an stands alongside the New Testament and Russian occultist books. One female Muslim informant who had been asked by Mary in a dream to visit the Orthodox church, stated that her 'luck is written down in Arabic letters but [her] cooking ability in Jewish letters'. The power of the 'gift' – I was told – 'is Muslim, Christian, and Jewish as well'. It would be perhaps more appropriate to apply that statement to the post-Soviet-era renaissance of occultism.⁵

Notes

1. Cf. e.g. I.A. Gadzhiev, 'Narodnaya mieditzina i letchenye niekotorykh boleznyey v Azerbajdzhaneye', in *Arkheologicheskiye i etnographicheskiye izyskanya v Azerbajdzhaneye* (1975 g.) (Baku 1978), pp. 96f.
2. Cf. 'Posledniy seid' ('The Last *Seyyid*'), *Zerkalo*, 17 November 2000.
3. Cf. e.g. N.J. Mikailzade, 'Religion against Parapsychology', *Journal of Azerbaijani Studies* 1/4 (1998); <http://www.khazar.org/jas/religion.html>.
4. Cf. I. Bağöz, 'Dream Motif in Turkish Folk Stories and Shamanistic Initiation', *Asian Folklore Studies* 26/1 (1967): 13–25; V.N. Basilov, 'Blessing in a Dream. A Story Told by an Uzbek Musician', *Turcica* 27 (1995): 237–46; V.N. Basilov, *Shamanstvo u narodov Sredney Azii i Kazakhstana* (Moscow, 1992), pp. 106–42; V.N. Basilov, 'Nekotorye materialy o shamanskoj bolezni u uzbekov', in *Etnograficheskiye aspekty izutchenya narodnoy mieditziny* (Leningrad, 1975), pp. 36–48.
5. Cf. Y. Rashkovskiy, 'Russia's Relations with Central Asian and Transcaucasian States from a Culturological Perspective', *Pro et Contra* 5 (Summer 2000); pubs.carnegie.ru/p&c/vol5-2000/3/.

Jerzy Rohozinski is a Ph.D. candidate at Warsaw University's Institute of Applied Social Sciences, Poland. He conducted fieldwork on the Apsheron Peninsula in 2000.
E-mail: jrohazinski3@wp.pl