My friend Nurgul and I were seated on tüşhüks (Kyrgyz, cotton mats) that were arranged along three walls of a small room, while Dinara prepared the low table in the middle for the séance. Nurgul had visited Dinara on earlier occasions, most recently when needing advice about the health problems of her cow, and she considered Dinara to be one of the stronger spiritual practitioners in Kokjangak. Dinara was a middle-aged woman of mixed Tatar and Russian descent and a self-declared ekstra-sens (someone with extrasensory perception). She was not surprised that a foreigner had come to consult her, because, she told us, many of her clients traveled from afar. Dinara took out prayer beads (mishbaba) and several stones, which she then moved slowly across the low table in circles and ellipses.

While performing her trade, Dinara described several of my personal characteristics quite accurately. However, when she declared that I was jobless and wanted to have my confirmation for this, I had no option but to object. A short but tense silence filled the room. Dinara turned toward
Nurgul, pointed to the stones, and said, “Here it clearly says that he does not have a job!” Luckily Nurgul offered her own insights, saying, “Well, you know, he doesn’t get paid, he is like a volunteer; what he is doing is more like a hobby.” Dinara seemed relieved and replied, still somewhat grudgingly, “That must be it, because I clearly see that he doesn’t have a real job.”

Approximately half an hour later we left the house. Nurgul reflected on why Dinara might have been wrong. She pondered that perhaps because I was a foreigner Dinara had been unable to connect with my psyche in the way she connected with other clients. “Anyway,” she added, “you can never be certain. A year ago she healed my mother’s eye disease, but perhaps she has lost her powers since.” This was not the end of speculations. A week later Nurgul reported that she had run into Dinara, who had told Nurgul that she had sensed that I had “powers,” and suspected that I had used those to obstruct her supernatural gifts. She advised Nurgul to be careful around me.

Why did the misinterpretation matter so much to both Nurgul and Dinara? Much was at stake in detecting the truth about spiritual forces in Kokjangak because, I will argue, the position of spiritual practitioners was anything but secure, and belief in spiritual power was anything but self-evident and stable. Moreover, these uncertainties resonated with the unpredictability that characterizes the spiritual forces concerned.

The foundation of spiritual healing and seeing in Kokjangak was unstable for three basic reasons. First, Dinara’s troubled response to the failed vision and her attempt to influence Nurgul’s interpretation of it illustrate the insecure position of individual practitioners. They did not occupy a formal office, and hence their reputation was dependent on interactions with clients as well as on talk about them among (potential) clients. For this reason practitioners needed to be constantly attentive to the signals they gave and the information that circulated about them in the community. Uncertainty regarding the qualities of individual practitioners was of direct concern to clients, especially to those who made significant payments or depended on spiritual practitioners for medical treatment or for guidance about important decisions. This was all the more critical because, as was common knowledge, there were many charlatans among the healers,
who were in it for the money but did not actually have any extrasensory powers. Through interaction with clients, spiritual practitioners achieved, failed to achieve, or lost their reputation among their clients and the population more generally. The result of this was a dance around the notions of authenticity, rationality, and mystery, in which mediums tried to project, and clients detect, truth. And yet complete certainty always remained out of reach.

Another source of spiritual practitioners’ instability concerns the phenomenon of “shamanic ideas and practices” more generally. The very reason for asking Nurgul to accompany me to Dinara was that as an educated foreigner I would have raised too many suspicions if not properly introduced. Even if these two women did not question the reality of spiritual powers, their efforts to explain the failure implicitly conjured the skepticism about such powers among many others, especially members of the “intelligentsia.” Dismissive attitudes may have been particularly pronounced in mining towns such as Kokjangak where the Soviet discourses of modernity and rationality had previously found strong resonance. But these dismissive attitudes were not just a legacy of the Soviet past. Spiritual practices were also condemned by representatives of new Islamic and Christian movements who saw the practices respectively as ineffective superstition or as satanic in origin. We will review these challenges in more detail below; for now it suffices to say that the field of spiritual healing and seeing was undergoing significant changes itself.

Third, the actions of jinns (ghosts or spirits) and the effects of mediation were themselves unpredictable. Spiritual practitioners such as Dinara acknowledged that they did not fully understand or control these forces. As alluded to above, I personally could well have brought new forces to Kokjangak, thereby altering the spiritual field. Moreover, because much of the spiritual world escapes our direct senses, and because spirits are capricious beings that do not act rationally but can be consumed by feelings of revenge, envy, and love, assessments made by spiritual practitioners were by definition tentative. Practitioners were but modest individuals acting within an overwhelming and capricious spiritual world that did not have a centered logic. Ironically, this form of instability actually strengthened the claims of practitioners (by making them less vulnerable to falsification) and thereby somewhat stabilized the spiritual field as a whole.
When these observations are applied to this book’s overarching theme of the power of ideas, it becomes apparent that with these forms of spiritual healing and seeing we have entered terrain whose dynamics differ significantly from those discussed in previous chapters. In contrast to organized forms of religion and nonreligion, the spiritual practices discussed in this chapter lacked these obvious forms of institutionalization. While this made spiritual practitioners easy targets for the critiques of atheist activists, pastors, and imams, it also meant that such critiques had only limited effect.

Equally important is to point out that the spiritual practitioners were no missionaries or activists attempting to convince others of an absolute truth. Nor should their clients be seen as strong believers who reached (temporary) collective conviction. Rather, everyone involved moved within a space characterized by multilayered uncertainty: practitioners gained and lost status, clients became more and less convinced, specific ideas were easily taken up and discarded. Instead of assuming that belief in spirits simply exists, the relation between subjects and ideas is a dynamic one, and interdependent with the actions of multiple actors. Focusing on these actions and interactions will not provide direct access to people’s “belief,” but it will show how “believability” is produced. In this chapter, therefore, I analyze the discourses and actions of spiritual healers, their clientele, and other actors, to show how the believability of spiritual healers and clairvoyants is socially mediated and experientially constituted.

**Proliferation of Spiritual Practices**

A wide range of terms was used to describe spiritual practitioners and their practices, often without much consistency. This terminological opacity was itself reflective of the uncertainty of the times and the range of influences that informed the practices. In offhand references, the most common general term for “spiritual practitioner” was *bakshi*. This term *bakshi* has its roots in the Chinese Empire where it referred to scribes, wizards, and Buddhist priests. From there it traveled first north to Siberia where it became a term for shaman, and then to Central Asia where it came to denote an Islamized shaman (Zarcone 2013, xxv). The Central Asian *bakshis*, in contrast to Siberian shamans, do not perform intercession on behalf of the community, nor do they travel to the other world. Instead they negotiate
or fight with the spirits that roam in this world (Garrone 2013, 18, 27; Zarcone 2013, xxv). When I asked ordinary people in Kokjangak about the term, they would explain that bakshis are part of kyrgyzchylyk (the Kyrgyz way), that they lean toward shamanism, and that their practices involve fire and dark magic.

Interestingly, the healers and seers who were involved in such practices tended to shy away from the term bakshi. One reason for their reluctance was similar to what Johan Rasanayagam (2006, 383) observed in nearby Andijan (across the border in Uzbekistan), where the negative connotations of the term from a reformist Islamic point of view formed an important reason for avoiding the term. But often reluctance to use the term was for the opposite reason, namely that the bakshi was an awe-inspiring figure. From this perspective, referring to oneself as bakshi would be presumptuous, implying that a practitioner considered his or her powers to match those of the great bakshis of the past.

The labels that practitioners used more readily included moldo, tavyp, emchi, közü-achyk, and ekstra-sens. In part this formed a spectrum ranging from practitioners who fully identified with Islam to those who employed unconventional sources of spirituality, such as science fiction images. The term moldo is also a general term for “mullah,” or person knowledgeable about Islam, but used in this context it referred to a healer who treats patients by reciting the Koran, a process by which relevant passages of the holy text make a connection with the patient’s body and thereby cleanse it of evil. The terms tavyp and emchi both mean “healer”: tavyp stems from the Arabic tabib, or doctor, while emchi stems from the Kyrgyz em, to cure. Their healing practices sometimes involved recitations of the Koran, but more often involved blowing, spitting, and whipping to cast out evil spirits. Közü-achyk literally means “with opened eyes” and has its Russian variant in gadalka (fortune-teller), though közü-achyks often did more than forecast the future. They also used their visionary capabilities to diagnose the causes of specific problems (including health-related ones), and combined this with prayers or other healing acts that “opened the way” for their clients. Ekstra-sens refers literally to the extrasensory perception of the practitioners involved, and was used by both Russian and Kyrgyz practitioners.

The various terms were used to evoke different traditions. Thus, emchi and tavyp connoted Islamic tradition, közü-achyk and bakshi evoked a sense
of Kyrgyzness, and ekstra-sens and gadalka were associated with Russians. However, many practitioners used more than one term to describe themselves, which illustrates that the terms did not indicate fixed professional traditions but rather overlapping and changing fields of spiritual practice.  

My initial interest in practices of spiritual healing and seeing derived from the negative attention they received from Christian pastors and Islamic leaders, just as previously these activities had been condemned by Soviet atheist modernists. Imam Talant (see also chapter 3) talked dismissively about the local bakshis. In his view these bakshis were to be considered swindlers (aferisty) who had placed themselves outside of Islam by going against the Koran. The problem, from his perspective, was that during Soviet times many people had failed to differentiate between “what the mullah says and what the bakshi says.” He attributed this to their lack of knowledge, a result of Soviet repression, because of which “they think that it is all Islam.” It was one of the factors that had motivated the imam to start teaching yiman (Kyrgyz, belief, also connotes “morality”) classes in the schools. Equally negative, but from a different perspective, was Pastor Kadyrjan’s view (see chapter 5) on spiritual activities. He saw Kokjangak as a place replete with dark occult forces, which to him indicated that the town was a satanic stronghold. His aim was to defeat Satan in his home territory, something that would constitute a major blow to his might, and thereby initiate a domino effect in the region.  

Whether or not these religious leaders would ever succeed in their struggles against what they denounced as “occultism” or “shamanism,” the lamented practices were definitely thriving in the 1990s and early 2000s. As others have noted, this was a period in which there was a “‘new wave’ of bakshi activity” throughout Central Asia (Vuillemenot 2013, 60; Som-fai Kara 2013, 55). Kokjangak had at least twenty spiritual practitioners who regularly received clients. Of the eight healers I got to know, only one had been active during Soviet times; all others had taken up this trade in the 1990s. As one male acquaintance told me: “During the Soviet period there were far fewer [practitioners] than now. We were hardly aware of them, but perhaps in the villages [people] knew about them.” Moreover, he added, “Back then they did it secretly, not like now.”  

The theme of post-Soviet proliferation often surfaced in conversations with residents of Kokjangak. Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union interest in spiritual healing and seeing had surged. One middle-aged
woman voiced the general idea as follows: “These bakshis sprang up like mushrooms after the Union fell. There was so much talk about them at the time. We were constantly hearing, ‘Here they heal, there they heal.’” In the early 1990s there had been several occasions when bus trips were organized to cities in Uzbekistan’s part of the Fergana Valley to enable inhabitants to attend the healing sessions of famous spiritual healers. And when traveling visionaries came to Kokjangak, many residents took the chance to speak with their ancestral spirits.

The way people spoke about these events suggested that at the time they were approached as the next “new” thing. But ten years later, these same ideas and practices were often met with cynicism; the power of healers and clairvoyants was definitely not accepted by all. This was particularly the case among my “not religious” acquaintances who tended to describe all spiritual healers as charlatans. As one of them mused during a conversation:

[In the early 1990s] the number of clairvoyants [ekstra-sens] and fortune-tellers [gadalki] was rising strongly because it was the transition period [perekhod-nyi period]. For most people this was a very difficult time. They got sick and started to speak with spirits. If you look here in town, it was mostly poor people [who started to consult spiritual healers], the reason being that life was difficult and their psyches couldn’t handle it. Second, it was a way to earn money.

However, even those who were adamant that it was all deception insisted that it had been different in the past. Several skeptics recollected that in their youth (in the 1950s or 1960s) they had witnessed the performances of bakshis who “had real power.” For example, my acquaintance Nurbek remembered that in his childhood (in the 1960s) he had seen the last real female bakshi (or bübü) who was active in the region. This woman lived in a nearby village and had been called on to cure a baby who had previously been taken to the doctors, but in vain. Nurbek: “We gave money and a chicken. She started to walk in circles, first slowly, then gaining speed. As if in ecstasy she jumped up and down meanwhile hitting everyone really hard [with a whip (kamchy)] . . . reciting certain phrases while she was jumping and beating.” Nurbek ascribed real powers to this bakshi, but added that nowadays no one possessed similar abilities. In short, there appeared to be a shared acknowledgment of the possibility of extrasensory
powers, though people disagreed on whether contemporary healers and seers could mobilize them.

The correlation between socio-economic disruption and spiritual activity was also reflected by the fact that many practitioners lived in the center of town, that is, in the part that had transformed most abruptly into an industrial wasteland. The rise of spiritual activities thus mirrored the inversion of social space. While in Soviet times the greatest density of spiritual practitioners had been in “backward” rural settings, now they resided primarily in the “chaotic” center of town. This is similar to Humphrey’s argument that shamans were particularly important in the chaotic and impersonal post-Soviet urban environment, valued for their ability to reintegrate individuals in space and time (1999, 5).

Encounters between Healers and Clients

With the “real bakshis” perhaps no longer around, yet with the possibility of spiritual power looming large, it would be problematic to speak about belief as if it were a stable quality. Once again we are confronted with questions about truth and falsity. Such questions are discomforting for anthropologists because they easily result in either reductionist (positivistic) logic or in the collapse of critical distance. Yet the truth question needs to be engaged precisely because it was so relevant on the ground. It was well known that some self-proclaimed healers were in fact charlatans and imposters, and thus the claims of individual practitioners had to be scrutinized for possible fraud. Moreover, the existence of spirits and the possibility of their mediation were not taken for granted by many inhabitants, adding an additional layer of uncertainty to any truth quest. However, and somewhat counterintuitively, it was precisely this “doubtful” engagement with the possibility of truth that gave people’s engagement with the world of spirits momentum.

In looking at how truth is produced in spiritual healing and seeing, my approach was to accompany several acquaintances on their visits to spiritual healers. The advantage of this approach was that I could follow the process of motivation and deliberation, and document how authenticity and authority (or lack thereof) were created in interaction—both between client and practitioner and among clients. This approach offers only a
partial view into the dynamics of belief, but it does generate important in-sight into how the conditions of belief—that is, believability—comes into being and disappears out of sight.

A revealing encounter was between Chinara and Marzia. Chinara, a thirty-eight-year-old Kyrgyz woman, worked for a local NGO in Kokjandgak and held a degree from the University of Osh. She told me that as an educated woman she was skeptical about spiritual healing, especially because there were so many charlatans (aferisty). Nevertheless, she would occasionally visit a bakshi, which she justified by explaining that “still, they have a special kind of energy with which they can relieve you of stress.” Chinara had known Marzia for a long time because the latter was a member of a credit and savings group she monitored as part of her job. In the past Marzia had offered to treat Chinara’s headaches, and this occasion seemed a proper moment to accept the invitation. Before we arrived at Marzia’s house Chinara told me some bits of information about Marzia’s life that she considered particularly important: Marzia had been married three times and was raising two orphans in her home. To Chinara these two feats already indicated that Marzia was a special woman:¹⁰

Women who become bübü or bakshi usually have some signs [Russian, priznaki]. Because they cannot find their place in life, they are not always able to find a reliable spouse, so they often end up being divorced. And with Marzia too, this is her third husband. . . . That is a general problem for all [spiritually gifted people], since there is an extra pressure on their psyche.

After we entered Marzia’s house and were served tea, Marzia told me that her grandfather had been an important tavyp (healer) and that she had received powers through him. She had not known about these powers until, one day, she had become very ill. Friends suggested that she should see a moldo, but she didn’t see the point and went to the hospital instead. She became paralyzed and could not leave her bed for a year, until a moldo started treating her. This moldo, for his part, insisted that Marzia should accept the powers he had detected in her, because otherwise she would become paralyzed again.¹¹
We were seated in the living room. In the middle was a shyrdak (felt carpet) with a white cloth on top. Displayed on the white cloth were a whip and a bead chain. At the edge stood several cups with salt, others with tea leaves, and a few plastic bottles filled with water, which had been left there by some clients to absorb good powers. The women sat down on the white cloth. Marzia instructed Chinara to relax and started her treatment. Marzia rhythmically hit Chinara with a whip, once in a while burping to release the bad energy she extracted from Chinara. She murmured words that were only occasionally audible enough to understand: “I am not God, I am not a prophet, but let the powers that I have support me in my actions,” and “Let my actions serve the purpose to heal.” After the session or séance (seans) was finished, Marzia took her bead chain to read Chinara’s state of being. I present here Chinara’s rendering of what she had been told:

It turns out that I am being protected by [a spirit in the guise of] a young man. He is jealous, and because of that my relationships with men fail to work out, that is why they won’t stay around. I first have to ask [this young man] permission to marry; only then will it be possible for me to find someone, to fall in love, and to marry. And really, it is always with me like that. First, something happens, and then it won’t work out. Maybe it is really true.

[As I told you before] my grandmother from father’s side . . . is related to water spirits, and now [Marzia] tells me that I have water spirits. She told me that I need to have this treatment more often; otherwise I will pass [the problems] on to my children. She also told me: “In the near future you will get a paper that will make you happy, and will increase your money.” . . . That I have these people-spirits and that I need to prevent it from being passed on to my children—those are the things that I hear constantly. But what really surprised me was what she said about water spirits.

When we got back to Chinara’s office, her assistant told her that the provincial government (Kyrgyz, akimiat) had called—they had received a fax from Bishkek saying that President Akaev was about to visit the province and that Chinara was expected to give a talk about her organization’s work. Naturally, Chinara saw this as a confirmation of the forecasting powers of Marzia. But more than this, it was the link that Marzia had made between her and her grandmother that she saw as significant. Although on
an earlier occasion Chinara had dismissed the stories of her grandmother as fairy tales, through this encounter and Marzia’s explanations these stories appeared to gain in significance.

My friend Nurgul has already been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. A Kazakh woman of twenty-four, she had moved back in with her parents the year before when her short-lived marriage unraveled because of the increasingly abusive behavior of the man who was still officially her husband. The parental home was a modest house on the edge of the town center, surrounded by a small apple orchard. This was where she took care of her daughter while doing the housework, which was quite a burden because her mother had moved back to her natal village in Kazakhstan, at least for the time being. She often consulted clairvoyants and told me that she, her sister, and her daughter had all been healed by a Catholic ekstra-sens of Polish background (who did not agree to meet me). Together we decided to visit Gulnara, about whose powers Nurgul had heard positive stories, although she had never visited Gulnara before.

Gulnara’s house showed few visual signs indicating she was a spiritual healer—there were, for example, no items left by clients or religiously inspired pictures. When I asked Gulnara what she would call herself, she pondered the question for a second and then replied that she was an ekstra-sens, because she not only saw things but also healed, took away spells, and “opened” people’s future. She said that even when she was a schoolgirl, she had already cured people: “They would come with a little child. I simply washed [these little children], and within three days, they would be better.” At the time she didn’t recognize her gift, and for the rest of her youth and early adulthood she did not actively engage in spiritual practices.

When she turned fifty, however, she experienced a change in her physique. For days on end she felt as if she was engulfed by waves, during which she started to see people no one else could see. She found out that these people—she described them as humans—were from outer space and wanted to teach her how to perform medical treatments. Gulnara had to remain indoors for forty days, during which she was taught the alien physicians’ skills. Among the skills she had thus acquired she counted giving injections from her fingertips as well as more complex treatments such as
transfusing blood and other substances in order to replace polluted body liquids. While treating her patients she often consulted these alien physicians and sometimes left it to them to perform the surgery, especially when the risks of complications were high.

Nurgul volunteered to be examined. She had to lie down on the carpet (shyrdak) in the middle of the room and close her eyes. Gulnara moved her hands up and down Nurgul’s body, following her curves, sometimes halting and pressing her hands onto the skin to examine more closely. The examination lasted about fifteen minutes. Nurgul was declared healthy, apart from a backache and an excessive level of stress. Gulnara explained that although during the examination she had already taken away some of the accumulated stress, Nurgul would have to come back for a series of treatments if she wanted to get rid of it completely.

After we left the house, Nurgul mentioned that she had felt shivers of coldness when Gulnara touched her. She felt this energy also in the room, and these experiences convinced her that Gulnara had real powers and was not a charlatan. I asked her what she thought about the physicians from the other planet. She said:

For me this is nothing new. I have discussed these things often with my neighbor [who also was an ekstra-sens]. You know, Americans have a lot of movies, fantasy movies, and these are about energy, about mutants, phantoms. Someone must put it in the heads of the movie directors, right? It is not simply that they make it up. For example, no matter how much fantasy you have, you won’t come up with a movie like The Matrix.

The Believability of Spiritual Practices

Both cases illustrate how the believability of spiritual healers and seers is mediated by the experiences, memories, hopes, and fears of their clients. Being reminded of what Grandmother once said, receiving a sign of impending prosperity, being confronted with the possibility of future loneliness—these all provided strong incentives for being favorably disposed to the messages of the practitioners. The practitioners made personal experiences such as divorce or poverty understandable by embedding them in larger fields of power, even if the features of the forces involved could not be fully understood. Further reflections on these issues provide insight
Reasons for Seeking Treatment

There were many reasons why residents sought the services of spiritual healers and clairvoyants. They were rooted in the uncertainties of existence, based on an awareness or at least an inkling that spirits actively influence daily life, and on the possibility that these spirits could be manipulated for good and bad.

Unsurprisingly, health problems were the most common reason for seeing a clairvoyant or spiritual healer. In some cases the client had received biomedical treatment at the hospital without obtaining the desired effect and visited a spiritual healer as a last resort. Financial considerations clearly played a role. As one woman said: “When I go to the hospital, they just ask for money—money, money, money. You need to pay for everything: for registration, for seeing the doctor, for treatment.”

Deterioration of health services was also mentioned. One middle-aged man told me: “You know, during the Soviet period we had excellent health care. But they sold all the equipment, so what kind of treatment do you expect?” The message, apparently, was that spiritual healing provided better value for money (which is not to say that choosing one or another form of treatment was based on explicit calculations).

Aside from the monetary aspect, an important consideration in deciding which treatment to seek was the cause of a health problem. Whenever the problem was obviously caused by an accident or was a known medical condition, most people would first go to the hospital or medical point. Other problems, such as rashes, backaches, headaches, impotency, and infertility, were thought to be more effectively treated by spiritual healers. However, it was often difficult to determine the cause of a health problem. In fact, numerous physical problems—but also social ones such as joblessness, bad luck in business, and so on—could have been caused by someone having cast a spell on you, or by spirits who had latched on to you, as was the case with Chinara.

A Russian healer explained to me how to find out if a spell has been cast on you as follows: “When you have a feeling that things do not work out as they should, but you don’t understand the reason—then it is koldovstvo
“sorcery.” She added that you can detect it inside yourself as something that feels unsettled and out of place. In some instances people were confronted with concrete evidence of the casting of such a spell, as in the case of a young woman whose mother-in-law cursed her in public after she had decided to divorce her husband. Other examples included the following: a woman explained that she knew a spell had been cast on her when she found dry sand in front of her door; another told me she had found thin black threads tied into knots under her desk at work. This type of dry sand and the black knots were known to have been prepared by bakshis or other practitioners who engaged in dark magic (chernoе koldovstvo). Though such literal proofs of koldovstvo were not uncommon, the suggestion that magic was involved often came from a third person (a friend or relative) who had witnessed changes in the behavior, appearance, or mood of the victim. In a way, then, the significance of spiritual healing was produced by social communication on the nature and causes of specific problems. A general awareness of the potential of spiritual powers was constantly being regenerated, and even skeptics were not immune to the ideas.

This backdrop is important for understanding the popularity of spiritual healing in general, but it does not explain the values that people attached to the concrete treatments of individual healers. In fact, everyone knew there were some imposters, and hence there was no certainty concerning the actual powers of individual healers. This brings us to the question of how healers tried to establish their authority.

Appeals to Authority

In her discussion of spiritual healing in contemporary Russia, Lindquist (2001) refers to Weber’s typology of the three main sources of authority—rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic—and their adaptation by Carol MacCormack to the medical field, in order to arrive at a typology that makes sense for understanding the legitimizing strategies of spiritual healers in Moscow. These are (1) rational-legal, based on diplomas, documents, and formal education; (2) traditional, based on ties to the past and the invocation of tradition; and (3) alterity, or otherness, in which healers “draw on their own versions of globality” and are seen as mediators between the local and the global.
Appeals to rational-legal or bureaucratic authority were of minor consequence in Kokjangak. Whereas Lindquist (2001) has shown how in Moscow newspaper advertisements were used to foster an image of efficiency—by showing healers in a suit and tie or by mentioning degrees from official medical schools—such images would not have counted for much in Kokjangak. In fact, the town once received a visit from two men who called themselves representatives of a medical school in Bishkek and claimed they were designated to register the spiritual healers, offering them official certificates in exchange for money. Although one of the local healers told me that she had been impressed by the appearance of these men, neither she nor anyone else had bothered to obtain the “official certificates.” It seemed that the dilapidated condition of official institutions in the region—among which were educational and medical structures—led to a situation in which spiritual healers distanced themselves from official biomedical medicine and certainly did not want to pay money for certificates.

Appeals to traditional authority did play an important role in the way healers and clairvoyants presented themselves. This was evident from Marzia’s mention that her grandfather had been an important healer, invoking the term *tavyp* that signified an acknowledged position within the Islamic community. In other instances this invocation of tradition was visible in the display of posters of Mecca or, in the case of a Russian healer, icons, paintings of Jesus, and postcards showing the Virgin Mary. The connection with “tradition” also surfaced when Chinara evaluated the spiritual powers of Marzia. The way people described Marzia reminded her of the stories told by her grandmother in her youth, which, although her educational background urged her to regard them as fantasy, continued to be more than just “fairy tales.” Likewise, many people skeptical of contemporary spiritual healers made a differentiation between the powerful *bakşis* of the past and the charlatans of today. Claims of genealogical links to such recognized healers of the past and displays of traditional healing elements such as knucklebones, horse whips, or blessed water (see also Penkala-Gawęcka 2013, 41) were common, even if not always successful, ways of addressing such skepticisms.

In order to claim special powers for dealing with spirits, healers also appealed to registers of otherness, or *alterity*. Almost all spiritual healers presented their biography as exceptional, thereby describing themselves as
partial outsiders to the local community. The idea here was that only people who were born with special gifts, and had gone through extraordinary episodes of suffering, were able to engage effectively with the spirits, and to mediate between different worlds. These claims to alterity were often cast within the framework of tradition. Thus, Marzia’s story of having become paralyzed, of initially resisting her spiritual gifts, and finally accepting them together with the consequence of remaining unmarried, consisted of narrative elements that circulate widely among healers. Apart from making use of traditional elements, the displays of alterity could also make use of other registers. Gulnara’s stories were a case in point. Although her recounting of illness was a familiar trope, most of the elements in her presentation were novel ones, including spaceships, UFOs, and alien doctors. To some of my acquaintances this proved she was a nutter, but to Nurgul and presumably most of Gulnara’s clients it demonstrated that she was a powerful mediator between different worlds.

Ascribing and Contesting Believability

The described practices and self-portrayals illustrated how healers tapped into several registers of authority and incorporated elements from contemporary consumer culture. But while these self-portrayals were certainly commented on when clients assessed the worth of various healers, they were not decisive in such assessments. Although both Chinara and Nurgul included images of tradition and otherness in their evaluation of the healers’ spiritual powers, this is not to say that they were always convinced by the appeals to those registers of authority. The risk of forgery or deception was simply too high. Moreover, because Kokjangak was a small town where word-of-mouth information about individuals spread quickly, the self-presentations of healers were perhaps less important than the way they were talked about among friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Ultimately, the practitioners’ believability depended on how their effectiveness in forecasting and healing was communicated by members of the community.

The practitioners themselves tried to demonstrate their efficacy by telling stories of the number of people they had healed, by stressing the severity of diseases, and by mentioning that they attracted clientele from faraway places. However, they were well aware that their forecasts and treatments would not always live up to expectations. When confronted
with such cases they pointed out various reasons for failure. The most common explanation was that the client had not followed instructions properly. Another was that a new spell had been cast on the client, demanding further and more intensive treatment. Interestingly enough, such spells could also affect the practitioner’s powers (as in the example at the beginning of this chapter), so that their visionary and healing capacities were temporarily blocked by the spell of another healer or clairvoyant. Nurgul told me once how amazed she was that the healers “constantly try to obstruct each other’s powers.” She recalled a story of her ekstra-sens neighbor who complained that other healers had extracted her energy and that after one particular encounter she had been sick for two days. Nurgul laughed when telling me this story and said that she was happy not to be a healer herself.

Even among those who consult healers and seers there was a constant pondering over whether to believe the forecasting and healing powers of the practitioners. For instance, Asia, a woman in her late thirties, told me that although some people had real powers, there was a lot of forgery involved. She explained:

About a year ago I went with a friend to this healer [Marzia]. She said: “It turns out that your road is blocked, they obstructed your road. That is why you won’t marry.” And then she said: “I will open your road. You should bring a new lock, a chicken, three meters of good cloth, and three bars of soap—actually it should be seven but I will ask only three.” When we were outside my friend said that she wouldn’t go to her again because [Marzia] was obviously trying to pull her leg. We went to another one [for a second opinion] and were told: “Don’t worry. Although there was koldoutso, it is already leaving you.”

In this case, the vision provided by the first clairvoyant (Marzia) was “falsified” by alleging greediness, which to Asia and her friend indicated that she was concerned only with her own material needs. Asia later suggested that Marzia had probably invented the story of the friend’s obstructed road so that she could offer expensive treatment. Likewise, Nurgul, who figured earlier in this chapter, told me that she often tested the analyses of particular clairvoyants. Whenever there was a discrepancy she would basically choose the most plausible one. Since such stories about healing effectiveness were communicated among friends and neighbors, a very loose
and shifting differentiation emerged in the powers attributed to individual healers.

**Animating the Urban Wasteland**

One of Nurgul’s neighbors had been trying to sell her house for over half a year. She needed to sell badly because the whole family was moving to the north, so she had made a large sign saying “for sale.” The house was in a good location, at the edge of the center, in reasonable condition, with a sizable orchard and a small barn. In her view, it was logical to expect an interested party to come forward soon. But not a single person had made inquiries. Through consultation with a közü-ächyk she discovered that someone had been blocking the path to her house, diverting potential buyers from even noticing the “for sale” sign. She was hoping that the közü-ächyk’s efforts to remove the blockage were strong enough, and that the person who had blocked the road would not create new obstacles.

The proliferation of spiritual activity was rooted in disruption, linked to socioeconomic destabilizations and the effects these had on people’s everyday life. Healers did more than heal and clairvoyants offered more than glimpses of what the future might hold. They also made the postindustrial urban environment meaningful or comprehensible, explaining why one might fail to sell a house, for instance. The cityscape was not just background for the spiritual practices; the two were closely interwoven. As Caroline Humphrey has argued in her paper “Shamans in the City,” the practitioners “themselves ‘actualize space’ . . . and thereby create new contexts of the city” (2002, 203–4). By displaying their visions, the clairvoyants provided livable explanations for the hardship that people in Kokjangak experienced. Whereas an outsider might ascribe these difficulties simply to the asymmetries and destabilizing effects of the new economy, the clairvoyants managed to translate such abstract forces to more immediate causes that explained individual stories of success and failure.

Thus, the fact that someone did not manage to sell her house was attributed to the spiritual obstruction of the road leading to that house, while other visions explained why a suitable marriage partner was unavailable (in a place where labor migration had produced a deficit of men). Although these visions provided meaning and hope to individuals who were suffering, the clairvoyants’ visions for the city as a whole were often far
from rosy. Two of the clairvoyants with whom I was acquainted took their visions to a more prophetic level. For them, observations of UFOs, pervasive corruption, and the general decline of Kokjangak signaled that the end of times was nigh.

**Tenacity**

In the beginning of this chapter I proposed to differentiate between three levels of instability, each of which affect the ideas and practices related to spiritual healing and seeing in Kokjangak. One level of instability concerns suspicion of the claims of individual bakshis and the possibility of fraud, which resulted in a dance around ideas of truth and authenticity. Another level concerned the capricious behavior of spirits, the complex relationships among spirits and among bakshis, making the relationship between the world of the spirits and the human world an unpredictable one. Ironically, the unpredictability and complexity somewhat stabilized the
position of the practitioners, because failures of vision or cure could have been caused as much by the inabilities of the practitioners as by the unpredictability of the world of spirits. As we saw, the latter possibility was actively pursued by some of the practitioners as well as some of the clients. This resulted in a flexible space in which there was no complete certainty about any position—a space of ambiguity in which ideas of self and society emerged and were actively discussed (see also Louw 2010).

The question that was left somewhat hanging in the air was how these two levels of instability intersect with the second level of instability, related to external challenges to spiritual practices. During Soviet times the practices of clairvoyants, shamans, and other spiritual practitioners had been denounced as backward superstition. Obviously not everyone had bought into Soviet modernist logic, and the bakshi remained a known figure, part of “Kyrgyz tradition” (kyrgyzchylyk). But in urban contexts their position had become marginal and unimportant, as the recollections of inhabitants testified. Secularization was not just a myth: the image of modernity that had been so consciously cultivated in Soviet Kokjangak fostered skepticism about spiritual practitioners. Moreover, the Soviet welfare system made life trajectories more predictable and secure, which, together with the availability of free biomedical health services, meant there was less demand for the consultations and treatments of spiritual practitioners. The Soviet experiment had marginalized and destabilized spiritual practices but did not eradicate them.

The popularity of healers and clairvoyants partly stemmed from the severe socioeconomic crisis and the resulting uncertainties for individuals. Furthermore, their authority was enhanced by the loss of credibility that secular ideologies faced after the collapse of socialism. Certainly, “not religious” and self-proclaimed “modern” inhabitants continued to denounce what they saw as superstitious practices. The physicians and head nurses at the hospital were most explicit in their criticism and in stressing detrimental health consequences of reliance on spiritual healers. But their credibility was limited because the hospital was in disarray and, realistically speaking, hardly offered better medical care than some of the spiritual healers. Moreover, the “secular” critiques of spiritual healers were often undermined by the ambivalence of the secularists themselves, who valued the “spiritual” images of Kyrgyz history and admitted that among the charlatans and impostors were those with real powers.
The more imminent challenges to the described ideas of spirituality came increasingly not from secular voices but from religious ones. This trend has been reported across Central Asia. Thus, David Somfai Kara writes about Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that “in recent years fundamentalist Muslims have begun to put forward the idea that all these traditions should be excluded from religious practices, because they are not part of ‘real’ Islam” (2013, 53; see also Louw 2010). And speaking about Central Asia as a whole, Thierry Zarcone writes that “shamans are fiercely fought by orthodox Islam and especially by its radical wing, Wahhabism” (2013, xxvi). The situation was not different in Kokjangak, where the imam was one of the active agitators against what he described as “national customs.” The imam presented his view in the mosque as well as in the classes on religious history and morality (Kyrgyz, yiman sabak) that he taught at one of the schools. He knew that members of the older generation were often skeptical about his views, but he had success among a growing group of young men and women who were attracted to a purer and more pious form of Islam than what they had experienced at home.

And then there was the Pentecostal church headed by Pastor Kadyrjan, who had decided that “occultism” was the biggest obstacle to establishing a viable church in Kokjangak. The church did not dismiss local healing practices as ineffective superstition (as atheism did, and to some extent reformist Islam). Rather, “occult” practices were interpreted as being linked to Satan and thus part of a larger spiritual warfare in which Pentecostal Christians were fighting on the side of God. This also suggests that there were remarkable similarities between the worldview promoted by Pentecostals and indigenous notions about spirits, as well as between Christian faith healing (as discussed in chapter 5) and the healing practices described in this chapter. The rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the early 2000s can be partly ascribed to its affinities with existing notions about the world of spirits, and partly to its more centralized forms of communication. Why indeed did the converts of chapter 5 feel that through Jesus they were more likely to achieve their goals than through spiritual healers? One answer is that the Pentecostals were better organized and more effective in promoting their success stories than spiritual healers were. The church actively encouraged interpreting positive events as gifts of God and as examples demonstrating the effectiveness of prayer. Moreover, in church services and home-church meetings people were literally taught to interpret their
experiences in terms of Pentecostal thought. The Pentecostal Church, just like reformist Islam, was able to rely on institutional structures in the communication of truths. By contrast, the spiritual practitioners were on their own, and in fact actively undermined each other’s claims to authority.

Both reformist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity were gaining influence, in part because they could rely on institutional structures in delivering their messages, and also because of their more rigid denunciations of corruption and immorality. Moreover, whereas for many spiritual healers the economic and social crises in Kokjangak signaled the end of times, the new Islamic and Pentecostal visions had a more hopeful message. In their view, the crisis resulted from old corruptions (spiritual and social) to which their religions claimed to provide effective answers.

However, the fact that spiritual practitioners could not and did not advance “grand and hopeful promises” may also indicate their strength. The status of such practitioners depended on individual claims to legitimacy, and on informal channels that alternately stressed or challenged their effectiveness. This unstable basis of authority was in part their strength because it provided room for the negotiation of meaning and allowed for a flexible hierarchy among clairvoyants and healers. The healers may not have had the institutional mechanisms to advance a master narrative, but neither were they the prisoners of such grand narratives. In a society where the narrative of socialism had vanished and the rhetoric of capitalism, modernity, and transition turned out to be hollow, new grand ideologies or doctrines seemed to be destined to lead to disillusionment as well. That is, the smaller stories, the contextualized messages that relate the present to the past, give meaning to locality, and root individuals in their world, may prove more believable than the grand narratives. And if not, then they can easily be adjusted.