



Source: Patricia Cohen, 'Army says soldier's articles for magazine were false', *New York Times online*, 08/08/07.
Tags: Africa, film, sewing/weaving, sound, Kyrgyzstan, magic

Writer/s: Julian Richards

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

I had been looking forward to a chat with David Millar, so it was something of a shock to find that his phone number was no longer his. It was now apparently the property of a young woman who spoke with the well-bred rasp I associate with my students' mobile phone conversations.

'Yeah, David's taken early retirement. He was sick for a long time.'

David or no, I needed to see that film. So on my research day, three weeks later, I took a commuter train to Reading, negotiated the bus system and found my way to the archive. Cans of film and videotapes of all formats were stacked on the floor, on shelves, on top of cupboards, probably baked into illegibility by decades of sunlight that would have percolated through the grimy window, through which I could see the tops of exotic trees in the university grounds. Laura, smaller and plainer than I had imagined her, knelt on the floor to extract the three reels of *La lumière Kirghiz* from a steel cabinet whose warped doors could not be opened more than half way. 'David was always talking about this,' she said. 'We've had most of our course materials digitised now, so I hardly ever see things that are just on film any more.'

I said nothing. It was annoying that it was only on film, as that would make getting stills difficult and expensive. I felt relieved when she went through the door of the projection booth and I entered the screening room alone. The subject of the film was male Kyrgyz praise singers, but I was interested in their women's embroidered silk, which is what I was then writing about. As the lights dimmed I thought of Laura, behind me, behind the glass, postdoctoral fellow, playing projectionist for me, for me alone. An hour later, the film finished, and I had seen nothing of interest: the few women who had appeared in the background of shots were wearing everyday shawls and smocks. I could appreciate why the film-maker had been interested in the singers, though. They yelped, muttered and growled. They seemed unconcerned with clarity of tone, let alone tuning. Their audience ignored them; several times it looked as though the camera operator had been caught out, scanning the crowd of silent men sitting on rugs on the ground, searching for the source of some rhythmic humming that had emerged from the hiss of the soundtrack. Then the image would settle with a thin-faced man at its centre, and bounce and sway towards him until, in close-up, his lips could be seen trembling as he produced a sound like a pneumatic drill dipped in water. Once, to vary the shot, the camera panned away to the grey rocky hill in the background, past the oversaturated blues and pinks of the men's turbans; then the sound grew as if a door had been opened and the shot whipped back to the singer. He stared at me from the screen, his mouth stretched open, his throat clenched, the howl unbearable. Then he shut

his mouth, chopping off the sound, and dropped his gaze to the ground. The shot was held for a moment, then zoomed out crudely.

'I must put that in the digitisation queue,' said Laura. 'Did you like it?'

I was thinking about my own voice. I have never liked it much. Then I thought, my women sang with their needles, but the film-maker had not thought to point his camera at them.

I had been unreasonably distant with Laura, who had been very helpful and had no faults I could be sure of. She suggested we have lunch together. We each had a glass of wine. It turned out that she specialised in 'traditional paranormal beliefs' or, as she put it, naughtily, 'magic'. She was intrigued by the poetry of spells and rituals, she said, and though she had at first assumed there could be nothing materially real in them, she now felt that there was perhaps a smidgen of truth in some. She talked about records of medieval witchcraft trials: a woman was burned in Dorchester in 1525 for wearing a necklace of daisies with the stems pointing anti-clockwise, which allegedly caused insanity in her neighbours. And in 1420 three orphaned daughters of a Leicestershire squire were rescued from a burning pyre when an itinerant monk discovered that the devilish language they had been convicted of speaking was Latin. In West Africa, however, she had seen things she found hard to explain away.

I did not say so, but this was something I had heard before from people in this field. Indeed, I reflected when Laura had gone to the loo, I suspect that every supernaturalist ends up believing in it, just as I believe that the Kyrgyz women express themselves in their embroidery, rather than—as they themselves say—simply copying the most popular designs of others. But what in fact would you use magic for? I don't want a pot of gold and I don't want to make anyone sick. There are people I'd be happy never to see again, but at most, I'd like them to simply forget all about me, as if I had never existed.

We went back to her office. 'Here's something I brought back from my last trip,' she said, standing on a chair to lift something off a row of books on a shelf just below the ceiling. It was a long, flat snake skin. 'I got this in Ouagadougou.' It was black, with a brown pattern. 'My marabout told me that it was snakes who taught people how to speak. There is one snake scale for every human voice in the world. So you mustn't kill too many snakes, or people start to fall dumb.' I bent over the leathery thing in her hands. It did not seem to have a smell. I wanted to touch it, but didn't. Each scale stood out, sharp and glossy.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Julian Richards.