

Winds of History

Michael Taussig

Pneuma=

Spirit=

Song=

God=

Wind=

*Discourse of Winds*¹

Poetry and reality seem to combine with the winds that coalesce into spirit possession on the islands in the Strait of Hormuz, at the extreme southern tip of Iran. There it can get to 45 degrees centigrade, and nearby US nuclear powered submarines and oil tankers make their way into and out of the Persian Gulf.

The concentration of power and history in this narrow waterway is astonishing. To adopt standard nomenclature and call it a 'choke-point' seems insufficient unless you take it literally. In maps it comes across as a freak of nature, part of a child's puzzle with the southern element shaped like a horn protruding into the sea while the northern element opposite is an inverted V shaped inlet as if awaiting the south to close in. Imagine the helmsman navigating a long tanker through these tight bends.

In his letters about his visit to the enchanted land of the Tarahumara Indians of northern Mexico, Antonin Artaud wrote of its unusual rock formations as signatures of the gods. That certainly seems the case here too, in this choke-point of history and power where we can see 'god's signatures' - a place of sand and mountains, red, white, yellow, black, blue

¹ Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum*, 2004, University of Chicago Press, pp. 231

and green that at times seem crafted by human hands on the scale of giants.

This is also a land of pearl divers and the descendants of African slaves brought by Muslim traders across several centuries. In Iran such slavery was officially abolished only as late as 1929 and there is a fierce racial prejudice against people of African descent, many of whom drifted south to these islands. Is it so surprising then that this history provokes mediums who channel spirits in the form of the winds coming from Africa? There are other winds, too, coming north from Saudi Arabia and west from India.

I say 'channel' history, but I could just as well use the English language term, 'strait', as in the strait of Hormuz that invaginate history no less than geography since this suggests something narrow and perilous, even mythical, forcing you to enter at the risk of your life. Think of Odysseus forcing his oarsmen to row through the straits formed by Scylla and Charybdis. Think of what it means to die or at least forsake your self, your being and your consciousness to become the 'horse' of the spirit that has lowered itself onto you.

Most extraordinary of all is the person possessed by this spirit-wind, seeking cure, writhing and dancing while covered by a large cloth. Meanwhile the drummers drum and the shaman recites the poetry of the wind in Swahili, Arabic, or Farsi, depending on where the wind comes from. What the visual medium of photography cannot easily communicate is the magic of the sound of the drums and stringed instruments, and the poetry of the shaman, who supplants the Muslim mullah and western physician. All this is required for the winds to 'lower' themselves into the sick person under the care of the shaman.

It is tempting to understand these events in medical terms aimed at curing body and soul but what if we reverse cause and effect and think of the winds – these spirit winds of history – as taking advantage of human illness to perpetuate the history of slavery, cruelty, and caprice?

Writing in 1983 Iraj Bashiri says that the Persian word baad used for these winds can also mean 'blow' and refers to an ancient Persian deity of 'atmospheric change' called Vata or Vaya² There is also the connection to breath, as with the Greek word pneuma that implies the soul.

Bashiri names over 100 winds, each with its own type of shaman and its own characteristics. A large number of places in the world have their own winds with special names and spiritual features. Think of the Sirocco coming north from Africa across

² Muslims or Shamans: Blacks of the Persian Gulf

the Mediterranean which provides the sinister atmosphere that drives Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Or the Santa Ana winds sweeping north through southern California that Joan Didion evokes in her essay *Los Angeles Notebook*, a wind that sets people on edge. Think also of the winds gusting down from the north-west across the Pyrenees that can, so I've heard, drive you mad.

Walter Benjamin, too, wrestled with wind and the writing of history faithful to what he called 'the dialectical image.'

What matters for the dialectician is to have the winds of world history in his sails. Thinking means for him: setting the sails. What is important is how they are set. Words are his sails. The way they are set makes them into concepts³.

The 'atmospheric changes' that are the winds are inconstant and unpredictable. To the degree that the winds are the expression of history, this is history conceived of as open to chance, like witchcraft itself or the playfulness of the spirits in the winds from Africa.

The winds of history wrote the history of trade between continents, trade in music, raw materials, and slaves, not to mention many of the indefinable sensations that guide us through life.

895 words

³ Walter Benjamin, "Convolut N" in *The Arcades Project*, 1999, Harvard University Press, p 473