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White, Black and Yellow Shamans Among the Mongols

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1 FROM PROTOSHAMANISM TO THE STATE RELIGION OF THE GREAT MONGOL EMPIRE

The linguistic analysis of the Mongol names of shaman and shamaness existing in the literary and oral language, *böge* and *jīγarin* for a man, *iduyān* and *abjiy-a* for a woman, shows us by the meaning of their monosyllabic roots and suffixes that their origin is rooted in the protoshamanism of the paleolithic epoch, when the shaman gave moral support to all the men of his clan in hunting and in war, while the shamaness cared for a fire in the camp and made sacrifices to the Fire of her clan, asking for prosperity and health for all the members of the clan.

Encampments of paleolithic man are not rare in Mongolia. There are very numerous scenes of hunting and of sacrificing to the spirit-protectors of the locality cut in the rocks and cliffs with stone tools, not only in the steppes and mountains of Northern Mongolia, but even in the great desert of Gobi. It was not only for pleasure that a paleolithic artist cut in the rocks and cliffs with his very primitive stone tool drawings of a shaman or shamaness with a drum in one hand and a drumstick in the other, of men and women, of hunters and warriors with javelins, eagles and wolves, deer, and ibexes, wild horses and camels and even mammoths.

Mongol shamans recognized these rocks and cliffs covered with drawings as the places of this very old shamanist worship and of the sacrifices of their utterly remote ancestors, and many of these localities were, until the thirties of our century, the places of shamanist and even Buddhist offerings to the spirit-protectors of the surroundings, testifying to the antiquity of Mongol shamanist terminology.

The ancient shamanist tradition confirms that a fire from the hearth of a clan's chieftain was worshipped and personified under the form of a feminine spirit respectfully named *Gal-un eke* "Mother of Fire," because the fire of the hearth of the chieftain gave life to all the fireplaces of the clan's families. This very old custom of receiving the benevolent fire from the blessed hearths of their great ancestors survived among the khans and princes, descendants of the Golden, i.e. Imperial family of Chingis Khan down to the end of the thirties of the twentieth century.

An old shamanist hymn to the Mother of Fire described the Fire in such poetical expressions:

Oh, Mother of Fire,
Whose Father is Flint,
Whose Mother is Pebble,
Whose meal is Yellow Feather grass,
Whose life is an Elm tree!

The last four lines indicate that the fire struck from flint was first supported by yellow feather grass to which the chips of elm tree were added and only after this another ligneous fuel was used to kindle the fire. This way of procuring fire dates from an epoch very remote from the later cattle-breeding time when the dry manure of cattle was used to kindle the fire.

In the later manuscripts of prayers and hymns to the spirit of Fire we meet the expressions "Mother Queen of Fire" and "Mother Queen of the Fire of the Nation". The last expression belongs to the Great Mongol Empire of the twelfth-fourteenth centuries when the *Borjigin* clan of Chingis rose to the high rank of Golden (Imperial) clan whose ancestors became the ancestors of the whole Nation and, according to that, the Mother of Fire of the *Borjigin* clan was venerated like the Mother Queen of the Fire of the Nation.

The very rich mythology of Mongol shamanism, its written and oral traditions, has been preserved to the present time among the older generation of contemporary Mongol clans, some of which descend from the ancient Huns of pre-Christian times, as for example the clan of Yöngsiyebü, considered in the written and oral tradition to be the most ancient clan and the very kernel of the whole Nation, to whom a special hymn of devotion was sung on the feast of the first *koumyss* offered to the ancestors:

Aspersion to Yöngsiyebü, the great and Principal Corps of Ten Thousand,
Who is like an essence of *koumyss* and a ferment of *yoghourt*,
Who never delayed in rainy days to the fixed place,
Who never lost in foggy days the stated way,
Who gave his forces from a spacious length of times,
And was a Creative Nucleus of the Nation of Mongols,
Who gave his forces from immemorial antiquity
And was a Creative Nucleus of all the People!

Borjigin the Golden, the Imperial clan of Chingis khan to whom belonged my late Mother Dolma, descending from a line of *Tsoktu taiji* of the Khalkha, also was a clan of old Hunnic origin, a subdivision of the Hunnic clan *Qiyān* (*Kiyan*) mentioned in the ancient Chinese Annals. The members of the *Borjigin* clan were also divided into Whites or Nobles and Blacks or Commoners. According to the old shamanist traditions the White *Borjigins* were of divine origin *tngrī iḡayurtu*, and were the custodians of ancient shamanist rites, myths and customs connected with the cult of the imperial ancestors, and all were *taijis*, the Nobles of White *Borjigins*. A small part of their written and oral heritage I succeeded in collecting, noting down and keeping in my memory before their ascent *ante diem* to the World of their Ancestral Spirits.

The seniors of the contemporary descendants of the Kitan and Jurchen clans of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries also kept many interesting old traditions and customs that are very valuable for the study of Mongol shamanism.

The elders of the clans well known to us from the Secret History of the Mongols of the thirteenth century, such as the Tatar, Naiman, Merkit, Kerait, Taichut, Besut, Jalair and others now dwelling in the territory of their ancestors in the People's Republic of Mongolia, have helped me with their shamanist lore to understand and recover the long history of Mongol shamanism from protoshamanism to the State Religion of the Great Mongol Empire of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, the ancient relations of the Mongols with extinct peoples whose names remain only in the written and oral tradition of the Mongols or surviving folk culture, and to understand the rise and decline of Mongol shamanism, its fight against the doctrines supported by the state's might and force which in its blind intolerance is so different from it.

2 MONGOL SHAMANISM

Like Japanese Shinto, Mongol shamanism was a cult of ancestors, and its ethical and philosophical conceptions had many ideas in common with those of the Shinto, reflecting as well many peculiarities of ancient Mongol society, its clan organization, etc.

2.1 *White and Black Deities*

Mongol shamanism had ninety-nine deities sacred in symbolics of numerals in the Mongol mentality. Fifty-five of these deities were Whites, i.e. Beneficents for mankind. The other forty-four were Blacks, i.e. Terribles to all the evildoers of mankind and to the enemies of the Mongol Nation. All these ninety-nine deities were the national gods of Mongol Shamanism and none of the commoners of any Mongol clan dared embarrass them with his insubstantial bagatelles, since they were the Spirits of Ancestors of every clan, the souls of dead chieftains, shamans and shamanesses who during their life had devoted themselves to satisfying the requirements of the members of clans and who in the World of Spirits should solve the difficulties in the life of the members of their clans, commoners and nobles and even serfs.

2.2 *The Three Spirits Accepting Sacrifices: tayilγ-a-yin γurban*

2.2.1 Souls of the Clan Chieftains: Lord-Spirits

After the White and Black gods there were the innumerable minor Genii -- the spirits of a clan's ancestors, divided into several classes. The largest among them was the class of the souls of the clans' chieftains, introduced after their death by a special solemn shamanist rite to the Communion of Clan Ancestors and thus becoming members of the Communion and of the Benevolent Lord-Spirits who played a very important role in the life of a clan and its members. Everybody could appeal to the Lord-Spirits of his clan, worship them, and make offerings to them through the mediation of the shamans and shamanesses. In extraordinary cases everyone could invite the Great Shaman

ǰı̄yarın or the Great Shamaness *abǰı̄y-a* to make an appeal to the Lord-Spirits and await their invigorating reply or spiritual help which could increase the moral and material support of the whole clan to its members.

2.2.2 Souls of the Great Shamans: Protector-Spirits of the Clan

The next place after the Lord-Spirits is occupied by the souls of the Great Shamans *ǰı̄yarın* and the Great Shamanesses *abǰı̄y-a* who were introduced after death by a special shamanist rite to the Ancestral Communion of Spirits and became the Protector-Spirits of their clans and territories.

2.2.3 Souls of the Simple Shamans: Guardian-Spirits of Localities

The third class among the Spirits of Ancestors comprised the souls of simple shamans, *böge*, and simple shamanesses, *ıduǰan*. They became, after the same introduction rite members of the Ancestral Communion of Spirits and the Guardian-Spirits of localities of their habitation at the time of life and especially of the surroundings of their burial place with stone-heaps, *obuǰ-a*, erected in their surroundings on the summits of hills and mountain passes for the offerings to the spirits of defunct shamans and shamanesses.

People believed that the spirits of the deceased haunted the places with the stone-heaps erected for them and surveyed their surroundings.

Usually people chose their burial places on a high site so that a dead person had a mountain on the North of his head and a watercourse or lake to the South under his feet, so that his soul could arise on the mountain and observe the surroundings of his native land and descend for a bath in the water of his homeland. But the stone-heaps were erected only on the tombs and surroundings of the burials of the chieftains, and simple and great shamans and shamanesses. Each passer-by devotedly added a stone to such a stone-heap to gratify the spirits, or put horse-hair or a piece of coin or a crumb of something eatable or sprinkled with brandy for lucky passage through the territory guarded by the spirit to whom the stone-heap had been erected by his clansmen.

2.3 *The Three Spirits Accepting Supplications*

Besides the Spirits of Ancestors there were three classes of Spirits who never were introduced by shamanist rite into the Communion of Ancestral Spirits. They also formed three classes of spirits. The first of them was the class of the White Spirits of the Noble clansmen. The next class was the class of the Black Spirits of the commoners of the clan. The third and the most inferior was the class of the Evil Spirits of the slaves and nonhuman goblins. These three classes of spirits were named *ǰalbarıl-un ǰurban* "the three accepting the supplications" because in urgent need one could supplicate them and later thank them by making a libation of some brandy or tea or offer the smoke of tobacco.

These spirits could help the members of their families by sending them wild animals during a hunt, by guarding their children and cattle, preventing them from diverse accidents and by revenging or terrifying malefactors and enemies dangerous to them, but they never were the object of worship and the sacrifices of all the members of the

clan. They could receive their share of smell and odor from all the offerings to the local spirits or from the meals and drinks at the family feasts of the members of a clan and of the chieftain in the same manner as they had received during life their portion of food at the celebrations of weddings and other family feasts of the clansmen, such as the annual sacrifices to the Ancestral Spirits of the clan when people burnt the offering parts of the meat and ate the rest which was their share given by the Ancestral Spirits to all the participants of the sacrificial feast.

3 WHITE AND BLACK SHAMANISM AS STRUCTURALIZING FACTOR

It may be suitable to give here the schemes of the clan organization of the ancient Mongols before the establishment of the Great Mongol Empire of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries and of the structure of the world of gods and spirits of Mongol shamanism.

Scheme 1. Structure of ancient Mongol clan:

Chieftain of clan
Great Shamans and Shamanesses of the clan
Simple shamans and shamanesses of the clan
Whites or Nobles of the clan
Blacks or Commoners of the clan
Slaves

Scheme 2. Division of the gods and spirits of Mongol shamanism:

White and Black deities
Lord-Spirits of the clan
Protector-Spirits of the clan
Guardian-Spirits of the clan
White Spirits of Nobles of the clan
Black Spirits of Commoners of the clan
Evil Spirits

Following the division of all the deities of Mongol shamanism into White and Black, the Spirits of Ancestors also were divided into White and Black Spirits. The shamans and shamanesses worshipping these Ancestral Spirits in like manner divided themselves into White and Black ones.

The White Shaman or Shamaness could worship the Black Spirits but in this case they became immediately Black Shamans or Shamanesses without any rite of dedication to the Terrifying Black Spirits and simultaneously lost the right to adore and worship the Benevolent White Spirits who never victimize the turncoat of White Shamans and Shamanesses into Black ones. But the Black Shamans and Shamanesses never risked worshipping the White Spirits for fear of the Terrible and Vindictive Black Spirits.

The chieftains of all Mongol clans had in their camps the White and Black Standards, *tuγ*, pronounced *tuq*, which were the habitations of the White and Black Lord-Spirits of the clan. The Genius of the Lord-Spirit named *Sülde* resided in these White and Black Standards and the White *Sülde* cared for the welfare of the clan while the Black *Sülde* brought victory over the enemies of the clan and gave intrepidity to the warriors, and at the same time terrified the enemy.

Special Standard-bearers, one for the White *Sülde* and one for the Black *Sülde*, guarded the Standards which had an escort of Nobles of the clan in the days of Feasts of the *Tuq* and in the campaigns of the clan during wars.

The White Standard, *Čayan Sülde* remained in the center of the chieftain's camp in the days of peace and war, then the Black *Sülde*, *Qar-a Sülde*, marched at the head of the troops of the chieftain and, after the victory, the commander of the troops made the human sacrifice, offering to the Terrifying and Victorious *Sülde* of Ancestors the most important prisoner of war.

After the establishment of the Great Mongol Empire of Chingis Khan, his clan of Borjigin became the Golden (Imperial) clan, towering above all Mongol clans. The Lord-Spirits, the Protector-Spirits, the Guardian-Spirits of the Borjigin clan were raised to the high rank of the Ancestor-Spirits of the whole Nation of Mongols. All the Spirits of the Ancestral Communion of clans, i.e. "the Three Accepting the Sacrifices" changed their position of superior and independent Genii of the independent clans to become Spirits subordinated to the corresponding highest Spirit of all the Nation. Immediately the Lord-Spirits of numerous and independent Mongol clans became the helpers of the Supreme Lord-Spirit of the Nation who had received the respectful title "The Lord-Spirit of the Nation With the Ten Thousand Eyes" because the eyes of all the Lord-Spirits of the Mongol clans served One Supreme Lord-Spirit-of-the-Nation. The other clan spirits like Protector-Spirits, Guardian-Spirits also surrendered their Wisdom and Power to the corresponding great Spirits of all the Nation.

The cult of Imperial Ancestors promoted the development of the architecture of Imperial temples of the Ancestors of the Nation in the capital of the Mongol Empire and of the family temples of the Mongol Princes and chieftains of clans. Under nomadic conditions, in the steppes, the princes and chieftains of clans ordinarily used *süm-e ger* "the temple-ghers", *yurts*, which was the dismountable permanent habitation used by all Mongols and which consisted of the wooden collapsible carcass, (*trellis*) with felt covers, with a sanctuary emblem on top, just as the temple-ghers of the Ancestors in Mongolia had until the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, following the old shamanist tradition.

In all those great and small Imperial and clan temples of the Ancestors there were not only diverse images, dresses and arms of the Ancestors, but also the shamanist books which formerly belonged to some of them and Books of Rites, manuscripts on worship and on offerings to the Ancestors, books on the order of solemn ceremonies in the temples and palaces – *ordu* – of Emperors, princes and chieftains of clans – books on shamanist chiromancy, scapulomancy, dreambooks, manuscripts of shamanist prayers and hymns, hagiographa of eminent Great Shamans and Shamanesses of clans, etc.

The learned members of the Imperial Golden clan, the highly educated, intellectuals of diverse Mongol clans, the authors and translators from Chinese, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Persian, Arabic and other languages of the contemporary peoples of Asia had enriched Mongol literature as well as the shamanist one, and the conceptions of Mongol Shamanism rose at the epoch of the Great Mongol Empire to the level of the state religion of the Empire and were as ennobled and refined as the philosophy of contemporary Roman Catholicism after its acquaintance with Aristotelian philosophy, thanks to Saint Thomas Aquinas.

The downfall of the Great Mongol Empire of the Yüan dynasty in China in the fourteenth century and in the history of Mongolian culture the greatest annihilation of the Past, of the works of Mongol literature, art and architecture in China, with the ensuing devastation of cities, towns and their treasures by the Chinese armies of the Ming dynasty, the Islamization of the Mongols of the Golden Horde of Batu khan on the Volga, the Ilkhans of Persia, etc. caused irrecoverable losses of Mongol literature and shamanism.

According to an old Mongol oral and written tradition, the religion of Buddha was propagated in Mongolia three times, and the last expansion of Buddhism in the sixteenth century, supported by khans and savant Buddhist monks of great influence among the nobles, also resulted in the great destruction of priceless Mongol shamanist manuscripts preserved in the hereditary libraries of Mongol khans, princes, nobles and commoners of the various clans.

Buddhist literature in the Mongol language of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries often mentions the burning of a great mass of shamanist prayers, images and manuscripts in Northern and Southern Mongolia. To effect the propagation of the new religion, the Buddhist monks proclaimed that the White Genii of Ancestors, the Lord-Spirits, Protector-Spirits and Guardian-Spirits of Mongol clans had embraced the religion of Buddha and had become the Genii Protectors of the Buddhist religion in their territories. They identified many shamanist spirits with the Buddhist Genii-Protectors of the religion and Chingis khan was proclaimed an incarnation of the Buddhist deity *Vajrapāṇi*.

4 YELLOW SHAMANISM AS STRUCTURALIZING FACTOR

Many of the incarnations of Buddhist saints in Mongolia with good grace had proposed to the White Shamans and Shamanesses that they accept willingly like their White Spirits of Ancestors the new Yellow Religion, and all the White Shamans and Shamanesses embracing Buddhism received the name of Yellow Shamans and Shamanesses.

All Mongol khans and princes of the Golden – Imperial family of Chingis, after their conversion to Buddhism, preserved the cult of their great Ancestor Chingis whose authority was so great, that the most eminent Buddhist priests and monks did not dare even to think about the prohibition of this purely shamanist cult of Chingis khan and his Ancestors. The khans and princes continued their sacrifices to the Great

Ancestor and had for his worship and the offerings to Him their Shamans and Shamanesses and the manuscripts of shamanist prayers to the Ancestral Spirits and to the White and Black Standards revered by all the Nation. One of the reasons for the Buddhist khans and princes having White and Black Shamans was the cult of the Ancestors who were not Buddhists. On the other side, the Buddhist cloisters of Mongolia and the incarnations of the Buddhist Saints had numerous herds of cattle and believed that the Protectors and Guardians of their territory, not being orthodox Buddhists, preferred to hear and accept prayers only in their mother tongue without Buddhist mantras and the names of Buddhist deities, incomprehensible to them and, for this reason, priors of Buddhist convents and stewards of the courts of Buddhist saints had the Yellow shamans or shamanesses for offering the annual sacrifices to the shamanist spirits in order to increase the flocks of cattle of their cloisters and saints.

Many of these Yellow Shamans and Shamanesses had the books of shamanist prayers and hymns in Mongolian transcribed by monks with the Tibetan syllabic characters in the form of Buddhist books of prayers, and the monks and Yellow Shamans believed that a Mongol text transcribed with Tibetan characters is eight times more blessed than the same text written in Mongol letters.

But the Black Shamans and Shamanesses never did embrace the Yellow Religion of Buddha, and, persecuted by the Buddhist church, in their invocation of the Black Spirits they sang:

Oh, you who come eating ninety monks,
And return eating hundred thousand monks!
Oh, you who come riding the frenzied wolves
And maintain the fire with Kanjur and Tanjur!

Kanjur and Tanjur are the names of the Buddhist Tripitaka containing - the Kanjur 108 and the Tanjur 225 volumes, and the invocation bore the reminiscence of the great autos-da-fés of Mongol Shamanist books and images of the Spirits named *ongon* and in imagination requited ominously like for like.

At the present time in Northern and Southern Mongolia there are only old men and women who, forty or more years ago, were White, Black and Yellow Shamans. Therefore, a study of Mongol shamanism is very important for the history of Mongol culture as well as for the adequate comprehension of the historical events of, and the spiritual developments in, the Old World which were inseparably linked with this small and brave people before whom the pontiffs and kings of the Occident and the emperors and Khalifs of the Orient dipped their majestic standards.

5 CONCLUSION

White, Black and Yellow Shamans among the Mongols were all looking for the meaning of life in one's relation to one's ancestors, though the term "ancestor" did not mean the same reality for any of them.

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