

Contemporary shamanisms in Mongolia

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The aim of this paper is to outline the current situation of shamanism in Mongolia. It examines the relationship between shamanism and ethnicity, the phenomenon of urban shamanism and the emergence of shaman associations and shamanic enterprises in Ulaanbaatar. The study is based on a year-long field-work in Mongolia 2004–05, during which the author came into contact with the two most influential shamanic associations, the ‘Golomt Center’ and the ‘Heaven’s Dagger’ association and had interviews with the members, and attended a number of shamanic rituals that they conducted. The field study was conducted at a time when these associations and enterprises had already ‘grown up’, i.e. they had recruited a vast number of members and attracted enough clients to operate, but still had not reached the stage of economic prosperity. This was also the time when the partly conscious attempt of forging a standardized Mongolian shamanism mainly from Darkhat and Buryat sources and the recreation of Khalkha shamanism began to take place.

Keywords: Mongolian shamanism; Darkhat; Buryat; Khalkha; Uriankhai; urban shamanism

Shamans in Mongolia

In the past two decades, a vast number of shamans have appeared and reappeared in Mongolia, and shamanism and the concepts and theories connected to it have started to gain more and more popularity. Besides the revival of genuine shamanic traditions, a kind of Mongolian neo-shamanism came into existence in the 1990s.

A number of modern Mongolian shamans have their own offices and staff, like any other enterprise in the major towns in the country. These are usually called *Böögiin zan üüliin töw* (Centre of Shamanic Activities) in Mongolian. In most cases the head of a centre is a shaman, a high proportion of whom are often self-appointed. Many of those who used to be folk artists during the communist era started to practise as shamans after the fall of the regime. Performers of any kind of folk art, which they believe to have something in common with shamanism, often feel predestined to become shamans and claim that their artistic activity used to be the manifestation of their shamanic power, suppressed by the communist ideology. According to Mongolian traditions, however, the one who is predestined to practise shamanism never feels this predestination and does not want to undertake the fearful task of acting as a vehicle for the spirits. It is believed that they only become shamans when they are forced and tortured by the spirits to such an extent that they cannot

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bear it any longer. The shamanic vocation usually manifests in a long-lasting mysterious illness – the shaman’s illness (*böögiiin öwčün*) – with the symptoms of epileptic seizures (*tataj unax*) and losing consciousness. According to tradition none can cure this illness but the sick person him/herself by accepting the shamanic vocation. It is always an experienced elderly shaman who diagnoses the shaman’s illness and accepts the sufferer as his/her apprentice. In most cases those who are prone to this kind of illness are members of a shamanic lineage (*udam*), which they might not know of prior to their initiation.

In the Mongolian cultural region and even within the borders of Mongolia there are a number of shamanic traditions, which can greatly differ from each other, but the ways of becoming a shaman are very similar in all of them.

In Mongolia, shamanism is chiefly practised by minority groups such as the Darkhat, the Buryat or the Uriankhai. Superhuman knowledge and spiritual power are often attributed to these ethnicities.

Territories of Mongolian shamanism

In Mongolia the shamanic traditions of different ethnic groups are regarded as different ways and traditions of practising Mongolian shamanism, when in fact none of these traditions have Mongol roots. The shamanism of the Darkhats is closely related to that of the neighbouring Tuvans, and many of the contemporary Darkhat shamans are descendants of famous Tuvan shamans. According to ethnographic accounts the Darkhat ethnic group comprises a number of clans of Tuvan origin.¹ The Uriankhai, also known as *Mončooog*, is also an ethnic group of Tuvan origin inhabiting the Mongolian Altai. The shamanic practices of the Buryats resemble those of the Ewenk and Daur. Most Buryat deities, shamanic tools, accessories and rituals have their Ewenk and Daur equivalents which are alien to the Darkhats and Uriankhais. For instance, the consecration of shaman-apprentices known as *shanar* among the Buryats is also known and performed in a similar way among the Bargas, Dairs and different tungusic-speaking ethnic groups in Manchuria. Two of the most important spirits in the Buryat shaman pantheon *Abagaldai* and *Xoimoriin aaw* are widely known among the shamans of these peoples. Likewise the names of spirits that are amongst the most well known ones in Darkhat shamanism as for example *Iwidää yum*, *Xosiin aaw*, *Delden Mend*, *Ärildää börgöd* etc. and who are all related to a shaman of Tuvan ethnicity shaman *Jotog* are not known to the Buryats, Bargas or Dairs at all. There are only basic commonalities like the concept of the tripartite world² or that of the 99 *tengris* (deities) that connect these otherwise clearly distinct shamanic ambiances.

It is the language of the shamans’ ritual songs which happens to be Mongolian and the Mongolian identity of the shamans that make these different shamanisms Mongolian.

The territory of the Khorchin-Mongols, Southwest inner-Mongolia and the western parts of Jilin province in China, which I refer to as the south-western region, is another centre of proliferating shamanism. The shamanism of the Khorchins has also very few in common with the shamanism of the Darkhats, Buryats and others but has more proximity with that of the Manchu and Shibe. For this entire territory is outside

¹Nyambuu, *Mongoliin Ugsaatanii Züü*, 133–134.

²This is a world consisting of an underworld, a middle world between earth and sky, and an upper world or heaven.

the pale of Mongolia and thus does not exert much influence over other Mongolian shamanic traditions I am not going to elaborate on its distinctive features.

The Darkhat territory

The Darkhats live in north-west Mongolia west of Lake Khövsgöl in the Darkhat-Basin. This area is regarded by many Mongolians as an exotic and remote region where the purest form of Mongolian shamanism managed to survive. The Darkhats, in the minds of the Mongols, especially in Ulaanbaatar, are often regarded as dangerous people, endowed with the special ability of calling down curses to those who treated them badly. It is believed by many that Darkhat descent goes hand in hand with possessing numinous powers. Besides the Darkhats another ethnic group, the Tsaatan – numbering about 1000 individuals – is regarded as having the most powerful shamans. The Tsaatans are one of the poorest, if not the poorest, people of Mongolia, making their living from reindeer breeding and hunting. They are of Tuvan origin, and their elders still speak a dialect of Tuvan language. Their traditional lifestyle differs greatly from that of the neighbouring Darkhats and other Mongolian groups. Their peripheral position, different language and lifestyle make the Darkhats believe that what the Tsaatans practise is the essence of shamanism. The rituals, costumes and tools of Tsaatan and Darkhat shamans do not show significant differences: the greatest of all differences is the language; Tsaatan shamans are more likely to conduct their rituals in their own Tuvan language, while Darkhats rarely utter words of Tuvan origin during their rituals.

Darkhat and Tsaatan shamanism is often referred to as ‘pure black’ (*cewer xar*) shamanism, for it is believed that its concepts and practices are void of any Buddhist influence.³ However, the Darkhats and Tsaatans do make a distinction between two kinds of black (*xariin böö*) and yellow shamans (*šariin böö*), the latter being a religious practitioner employing a mixture of Buddhist and shamanist methods and ideas in his/her practice. There is also a third category of shamans, the white shaman (*cagaanii böö*), who is interpreted by the Darkhats as the shaman who communicates with the spirits of the heaven (*tenger*) and does not – and according to some cannot – use his/her power to harm people or any kind of living being. Consequently, the black shamans are feared by many for their abilities of calling down evil forces. Therefore, shamans who in fact practise black shamanism tend to introduce themselves to their clients as white shamans and explain that they never do harm to people.

The ideas of yellow shamanism seem to overlap with those of white shamanism. A Tsaatan yellow shaman from the district of Ulaan-uul claimed that only yellow shamans are beneficial for the people, only they can serve them in a righteous way. He said that the yellow shaman heals the sick, while the sickness is caused by black shamans’ curses.⁴ The Buddhist idea of alleviating the sufferings of the living beings is very much emphasized in yellow or white shamanism. Black shamans, who admit that they follow the black direction (*xar züg*), also seem to hold to these principles, adding that they are much more powerful than the yellow and white shamans, and they only use their superb power over evil forces when there is a need to defend themselves from the curses of their envious rivals.

³Buddhism among the Mongols is also widely known as the ‘yellow faith’ (*šariin šašin*) hence the term ‘yellow shaman’ (*šariin böö*).

⁴Shaman C. in Ulaan-Uul, Khövsgöl, 2005. Personal communication.

Among the Darkhats and Tsaatans a distinction between powerful and less powerful rituals can be observed. The less powerful one is called ‘shamanizing on foot’ (*yawgan böölöx*) or ‘daytime shamanizing’ (*ödör böölöx*). Daytime, usually divinations (*mereg tölög*) are performed, or later appointments with the shaman are arranged. During these daytime visits the shaman would diagnose clients’ illnesses or other problems by inquiring the spirits about the causes and the way the illnesses or any other problems should be cured or solved. The ritual that is conducted in order to solve a client’s problem is a typical night time ritual (*šönö böölöx*), also known as ‘shamanizing with a drum’ (*xengeregtei böölöx*), for the shaman’s spirits are believed to ride his/her mount (*umaa*), the drum, during these rituals. Night time rituals require donning the full shamanic costume, referred to as ‘armour’ (*xöö xuyag*) because the evil forces to be fought and ousted by the shaman are held to be hostile and powerful. The shaman’s armour is also an arsenal of miniature weapons made of forged iron. In comparison, during daytime rituals shamans only wear a traditional gown (*deel*) and a headscarf (*alcuur*). Though the daytime ritual is called ‘shamanizing on foot’ Darkhat shamans might play their jaw harp (*aman xuur, xel xuur*), which is also considered to be a kind of mount of the shaman as it is kept in a wooden box always with an image of a racing horse on its top.

The Buryat territory

The northern parts of the two eastern provinces of Mongolia, Xentii and Dornod, are mainly inhabited by Buryats. Their parents, grandparents and great grandparents emigrated from Russia during the 1920s and 1930s. The reasons for their migration were the increasing Russian influence and the growing number of Russian settlers in their territories, the situations created by the Russo-Japanese war, World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Mongolia’s independence from the rule of the Manchus in 1911 raised the Buryats hopes that they could live a peaceful life and would have the possibility to preserve their traditional lifestyle in Mongolia. Many of the renowned shamans of that era came along with the emigrants and now their apprentices are the well-known shamans of the territory.

During 60 years after the 1930s it was prohibited to practise shamanism in Mongolia, but shamanic initiations and other rituals were performed in secret. Since the 1990s Buryat shamanism has become more and more known to people in Mongolia, but books that are published are in Mongolian and on Mongolian shamanism; not much is written on the shamanism of the Buryats. The northern parts of Xentii and Dornod are viewed as a secondary centre of Mongolian shamanism.

In the 1990s, at the beginning of the great revival of the religious life in Mongolia, elderly Buryat shamans started to accept clients from the Russian Buryats and they received many of those afflicted by the mysterious shamans’ illness as their apprentices. Some of the masters initiated not only Buryat but also Khalkha individuals into shamanhood. The initiation and the practice of these Khalkha and later other non-Buryat apprentices required a set of rules and regulations that would make a clear distinction between them and the Buryats. The rules were applied to the non-Buryat shamans’ initiation and consecration rituals, and their costume and paraphernalia. In the consecration rituals of the Buryats, birch trees (Buryat *xuha*) are erected at the sacral site, but in the same ritual some Buryat masters replaced

them with pine trees (*gacuur*). The birch, venerated as a sort of sacred tree by the Buryats, seemed inappropriate to use for religious purposes of other ethnicities.

Certain accessories of the shamanic costume are also to indicate their wearers' descent, but most of their tools are the same as those of the Buryats. For instance, instead of a Buryat-style round skull-cap (Buryat *maixabša*) they wear a headgear adorned with vulture-feathers, but their shamanic whip, which they use for purification and blessing during the rituals, is made of the same material and has the same miniature weapons hung on it as that of the Buryats. The distinctive features of non-Buryat shamans' requisites and rituals are allusions to characteristics of the particular ethnicity attributed to them by the Buryats. In case of the apprentices, for example, one would find a number of Buddhist symbols on their costumes and Buddhist elements in their practices. This is in accordance with the fact that Buryats regard Khalkhas as an ethnic group having been exposed to Buddhist influence to a greater extent than themselves.

The most well-known Buryat shaman in Mongolia, Ch. Tseren (*Čojjiliin Ceren*), was the one who had the most apprentices, numbering about 300, and he was the one who made most of the rules and regulations of Buryat shamanism applicable to non-Buryat apprentices. His apprentices spoke of him as the master who reconnected the s with their shamanic traditions (*Khalkha böögiin udmiiг zalgуulj ögsön*) that had been blurred by the Buddhist ideas during the past centuries. Thus Buryat shamanism started to become the basis of a new Mongolian shamanism, a *ménage* of different traditions.

Originally in Buryat shamanism the distinction between powerful and less powerful shamans and rituals, similarly to what we can see among the Darkhats, is manifested by the contrast of 'black' and 'white'. Black shamans (Buryat *xara zügei böö*, *xara talai böö*, *xarain böö*) are regarded to possess serious magic power and be capable of solving serious problems and cure serious illnesses. Ordinary peoples' attitude towards black shamans, whether they are Buryats or Darkhats, is usually the same – they are feared for their powers. A Buryat shamaness, Altantsetseg (*Altanceceg*), at the beginning of an interview in relation to her shamanic practice, said that she performed various kinds of rituals except for curses (*xaraal žatxa*) and anything that she might consider harmful. As she explained, Buryat shamans have to take ninety-nine oaths⁵ (*yürön yühön tangarag*) during their first initiation, which prevents them from causing any kind of harm: it is prohibited to endanger human life (*xünii amind xürexgüi*), put obstacles in people's way (*xünd saad xiixgüi*) and quarrel (*xerüül margaan xixiiг xorgilono*), but they have to help all the living creatures (*xamag amitnii tusiin tuld yawana*).

White shamans (Buryat *sagaanai böö*) are not regarded as 'real shamans' (*jinxene böö bis* – not real shaman) but as bone-setters (*barias*). They are able to set broken bones, and they are skillful masseurs and familiar with the medical treatments of minor illnesses. During their rituals they invoke Buddhist divinities (*burxan garwal*), the most important of whom is the White Old Man (Buryat *Sagaan üben*; *Cagaan öwgön*). Instead of the drum (Buryat *xese*) of the black shamans, the whites have a bell (Buryat *xonxo*) – the same type of bell used by Buddhist monks in the lamaseries. Buddhist incantation formulas such as *aryaa wade* and *om mani badme xum* are often the initial sentences of their invocations. The dualism of black and white qualities appear in various forms in the Buryat shamanism and are associated

⁵For more about shaman-oaths see: Gantogtox, 'Böögiin šaxangiin üg xelleg'.

with the notions of hard (Buryat, *xatuu*) and soft (Buryat *zöölen*), heavy (Buryat *xüinde*) and light (*xüngen*), and male (Buryat *ere*) and female Buryat *eme*). As Buddhism is an institutionalized religion and its rituals do not involve the killing of animals, shamanic practices influenced by Buddhism are regarded somehow weaker, softer and lighter⁶ than those of ‘pure shamanism’⁷. The white⁸ colour also expresses these characteristics to the Buryats. The term ‘yellow shaman’ is also used by the Buryats, however less frequently than ‘white shaman’. The ‘yellow shaman’ is more a Mongolian term directly referring to its Buddhist elements; while the ‘white shaman’ is more of the Buryats own expression that alludes to the softness and lightness of it. One would not be greatly mistaken by interpreting these two terms as synonyms.

Having both black and white qualities, i.e. becoming black and white shamans (Buryat *xara sagaaniye xabsarhan böö*), is not only possible but a commonplace phenomenon among the Buryats. There are also shamans – mainly among the less trained, non-Buryat apprentices – who classify themselves as yellow and white (*cagaan šariig xawsarsan*) and even black-white and yellow shamans (*xar cagaan šar gurwuulangii ni xawsarsan*), adding that they are engaged in all fields of shamanism.

The Uriankhai territory

Very little is known about the shamanism of the Altai Uriankhais. The Golomt centre has an Altain Uriankhai shaman among his members, whose grandfather Darichuluun allegedly was a famous shaman.⁹ Nevertheless, neither about him nor about other shamans from the Altai region do we have considerable data in the specialized literature. There are only rumours and allusions considering the mere existence or survival of shamanic traditions in that territory. For example, the Mongolist S. Dulam, in the preface of his book *The Tradition of Darkhat Shamans*, writes that it is intended to be the first volume of a series called *Texts of Mongolian Shamanistic Literature* and is planned to be followed by *The Tradition of Buryat Shamans*, *The Tradition of Uriankhai Shamans* and *Texts Related to Shamanism in Mongol Script*. *The Tradition of Darkhat Shamans* was published in 1992, but the other volumes have not come out yet.¹⁰ However, the thought that Uriankhai shamanism might be a rich source of shamanic texts and traditions already existed at the beginning of the 1990s.

The problem of Khalkha shamanism

The ascertainment that shamanism no longer exists among the Khalkhas is widely accepted in Mongolia. In fact, there are practising Khalkha shamans, but they have all been trained by either Darkhat or Buryat masters. In a strict sense the word *böö* ‘shaman’ only refers to the masters, the shamans who have been practising for a long time and have apprentices. Since the revival of Mongolian shamanism none of the

⁶‘Lighter’ in a sense that these rituals do not demand much effort from the shaman.

⁷Purity can also be expressed by black colour when it indicates that something is homogenous, is not a mixture of two or more components (*yamar č xolicgüi*). For example *xar us*, literally: black water – pure water.

⁸White colour can also express purity in a sense that something is not dirty (*bujargüi*), not evil. For example *cagaan sanaa*, literally: white intention – benevolence.

⁹Süxbat, *Böö*, 143.

¹⁰Dulam, *Darxad böögiin ulamjlal*.

Khalkha apprentices have acquired mastership. It does not mean that they do not have their own apprentices, in some cases they do, and even their apprentices might have their own apprentices as well. In these cases the oldest master in the chain is the ultimate master, who controls the whole society of apprentices belonging to his/her circles. The statement that there are no Khalkha shamans in Mongolia should be understood that there are no Khalkhas among the oldest shaman masters.

Every shamanic circle has its own traditions, and shamans belonging to the same ethnic group can differ from each other if they are trained by different masters. Thus, contemporary Khalkha shamans – following the path designated by their Darkhat or Buryat masters – practise Darkhat or Buryat shamanism. It means that there are in fact Khalkha shamans in Mongolia, but there is no Khalkha shamanism. The reconstruction of Khalkha shamanic traditions is the major concern of many Mongolian shamans, including the Darkhat and Buryat masters who have apprentices. It is commonly accepted that the extinction of Khalkha shamanism is due to the spread of Buddhism between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that institutionalized religious practitioners such as the *gürten*, the *choijin* or the *lüüjinch* took the place of the shamans among the Khalkhas. These practitioners are also often referred to as yellow shamans. Apparently based on this rationale, the implements of the contemporary Khalkha shamans (and also the implements of white and yellow shamans of the Buryats and Darkhats) are made to resemble those of the *gürten*, *choijin* and *lüüjinch*. Although Khalkhas usually differ greatly from their Darkhat and Buryat fellow apprentices, their incantations and the way of conducting their rituals, i.e. the nucleus of their shamanic practice, is the same.

The attempts to reconstruct shamanism are interwoven with the disturbing notion that despite the Khalkhas are held to be the direct descendants of Chinggis Khan, not only the ruler of all Mongols, but also the greatest promoter of Mongolian shamanism, it is in fact the Khalkhas who have completely lost their shamanic tradition. In contemporary Mongolian shamanism, where minority descent is an obvious benefit, Khalkhas (who give the majority of Mongolia's population) play the least significant role, despite of the fact that Khalkha apprentices in many shamanic circles outnumber the Darkhats or the Buryats. According to the accounts of a young Khalkha shamaness, Z, descent often reflects discredit upon a shaman. Z disclosed that she had been instructed by her master (a Buryat shamaness) to conceal the fact that she was in shamanic circles for her clients might not trust her abilities and her Buryat and Darkhat rivals would spear no effort to tarnish her reputation.

Urban shamanism

Since the 1990s a number of shaman centres, associations and offices have appeared. Most of them, which are the smaller ones, are like private enterprises offering shamanic services such as fortunetelling, healing and solving different kinds of problems. The largest and most well known of shamanic organizations is the *Golomt* Centre, in Ulaanbaatar. The *Golomt* is not exactly like other shaman centres in the country. Its main goal is to unify those shamans who follow the traces of their ancestors and practise the genuine traditional way of their faith, hence the organization's full name: *Mongol Böögün Golomt Töv* (The Hearth of Mongol Shamans). Organizations of similar purposes can also be found in other parts of northern Asia, like the *Düngür* Centre in Tuva or the *Xese Xengereg* Centre in Buryatia. *Golomt* members also have their own offices, and they certainly make some

profit from doing their job, but the costume they wear, the tools they use and the songs they sing are all parts of the heritage descended from their shaman ancestors. Possessing this heritage is the main factor which differentiates the *Golomt* from other organizations. Studying Mongolian shamanism, though not in an academic way, also fits in the scope of the Centre's activity. As a result of their research several papers and a few books have been published in Ulaanbaatar.

Another well-known shamanic organization is the *Tengeriin Sülder Böögiin Xolboo* (The Heaven's Dagger Shamans' Association) founded on the initiative of G. Gantogtokh, a Buryat ethnographer and university teacher, who is the president (*yerönxiilögč*) of the Association. The Head (*tergüün*) of the Association was Choijiliin Tseren, the renowned Buryat shaman, until his death in 2005. The members are all apprentices of Tseren numbering more than 200 individuals, many of whom are natives of Russia and China. One of the Association's main purposes is to lay down the foundations of shamanic education and to establish a set of rules and regulations that could be applied to the apprentices of different ethnicity. Thus the *Tengeriin Sülder* began to take the shape of an educational institution that even issues certificates and degrees.

The shamans belonging either to the *Golomt* or to the *Tengeriin Sülder* are not 'genuine' urban shamans. Most of them were born in Khövsgöl or Dornod, where traditional forms of shamanism are flourishing. Although a great many of them have moved to Ulaanbaatar and practise there under urban circumstances, they are still adherent to their Darkhat or Buryat traditions. They might perform their rituals in a living room, but the performances are very much alike those performed by their masters in the countryside.

'Genuine' urban shamans, however, come from other parts of Mongolia, where shamans are extinct, probably for centuries. One of the most widely known urban shamans in Mongolia is probably shaman Byambadorj, the author of several books¹¹ on shamanism. He is frequently referred to as a 'State Shaman' (*Töriin zaarin*), and he performs the great sacrificial ritual for the Burkhan Khaldun mountain, a sacred place near to which – according to *The Secret History of the Mongols* – Chinggis Khan was born, and where he used to pray to Heaven.¹² His sacrificial ritual is classified as a 'State Sacrifice' (*Töriin Taxilga*) and is conducted with the participation of the Mongolian president. Byambadorj was born in Khovd a province where Uriankhais actually live, but far from his exact birthplace (*Darwi sum*). It is uncertain whether he is or not, since he claims that he belongs to the Olkhonud (*olxonuud*) clan, which is known from *The Secret History*, but there is no group of people who would consider themselves Olkhonud today in Mongolia. Byambadorj has a one-storey brick-house in Ulaanbaatar called 'The Centre for Shamanic Activities' (*Bögiin Zan Üiliin Töw*), where he performs his rituals and receives his clients. The building is located next to a private university called *Chingis Khaanii Neremjit Ikh Zasag Ikh Sarguuli* (The Chinggis Khan University of Great Rule), with which Byambadorj and his activities are closely affiliated. It might be of interest that the university was founded by a Buryat politician, Nyam-Osor, whose political idea has long been to restore Khanate as the ideal form of the Mongolian State.¹³

¹¹Byambadorj, *Tenger Šütlegiin Amin Sudar*.

¹²Byambadorj, *Burxan Xaldun Tengeriin Taxilga, Böögiin Yos*.

¹³Nagaanbuu and Zorigt, *Bidnii Meddeg Nyam-Osor*.

Another important figure in contemporary Mongolian shamanism is Zorigtbaatar, the uneducated (*bolowsrolgüi*) shaman – as he often refers to himself. Zorigtbaatar has a plot with a small building and two yurts in Ulaanbaatar. One of the yurts, the ‘Yurt of Rituals’ (*nomiin örgöö*) is built on a wooden foundation with wheels, which resembles the bullock cart of the great khans of the Mongolian Empire. The other yurt is called the ‘Yurt of Meditation’ (*byasalgaiin örgöö*), where Zorigtbaatar and his apprentices (4–6 people in 2004) and followers meditate every Saturday. Zorigtbaatar distinguishes between black and white shamans and firmly holds to the idea that people should respect only white shamans for what is white is clear and benevolent while black colour can only bring adversities, impurity and misfortune. He even prohibits wearing black pieces of cloth during his rituals. Zorigtbaatar despises shamans who foam at the mouth and lose consciousness at the end of their rituals. According to him these are signs of the black shamans’ deceptive behaviour that attracts the attention of their audience.

Before a ritual begins, Zorigtbaatar dons his costume, a glittering gown made after the fashion of the great khans’ caftan and seats himself on his richly carved throne paced in the northern part of the yurt. After a while he would spring up from his throne as he was startled by something and he would start speaking angrily to the audience. The rituals always begin with Zorigtbaatar’s long (one to two hours) speech, during which he elaborates his ideas about shamanism and the Mongols. Shouting, scolding and vituperation are regular components of his speech, which is a means by which he gives vent to his anger and lets his people know that he is greatly discontented with the life of contemporary Mongolian people. He blames them for their incapability, their powerlessness. He most often lifts up his words against alcoholism, unemployment and against the desire of many Mongolians to leave Mongolia for a richer country. He also attempts to convince people about not eating Korean or Chinese food for they are unfit to Mongolian stomach.

According to Zorigtbaatar, what should be followed and always kept in mind is what he calls ‘The Essence of Chinggis’ (*Čingisiin xoromson*): before making a decision or doing something, Mongolian people should always ponder about what Chinggis would do in the particular situation. Zorigtbaatar compares the triumphant deeds of Chinggis Khan to the failure of the most afflicted and distressed people of contemporary Mongolia. The striking contrast is obviously to make the audience feel shameful and acknowledge Zorigtbaatar as an authoritative agent of the ideas attributed to Chinggis Khan. The ritual¹⁴ itself that follows Zorigtbaatar’s speech is a singing performance usually accompanied by the play of two horse-headed fiddles (*morin xuur*). The incantations are bilingual; first Zorigtbaatar sings in Mongolian, and then as he claims, sings the same song in the spirits’ language, which he learned directly from the spirits. As he says this language is intelligible to every spirits around the world. After the ritual, food and drink brought by the participants are distributed among them and a flask of sacred water (*aršaan*) is sold to each of them for 9,999 tögrögs (approximately 9 US dollars).¹⁵

The revival of shamanism in Mongolia is closely connected with the cult of Chinggis Khan being also a revival of nationalistic pride that had been suppressed

¹⁴He calls his rituals *unslaga* ‘reading’, which is commonly used to refer to Buddhist rituals where lamas recite the holy scriptures.

¹⁵As Zorigtbaatar explained, the number 9 is the most auspicious number in the Mongolian culture; that is why the price of the water consists of nines only.

during the Soviet era similarly to other forms of practising religion. It is essential to bear in mind that the religious revival is mostly about the renaissance of Buddhism, and shamanism plays a more and more significant but still a secondary role in the religious life of the contemporary Mongolians. The fact that Mongolians often think of shamanism as their primeval religion (*yazguur šašin*), the core of the Mongolian way of thinking, and the essence of nomadism and Mongolness, makes shamanism provoke the attention of an increasingly wider public. Primarily it is the ancientness of shamanism that makes people think that it is more indigenous to Mongols than Buddhism. Darkhat and Buryat shamans' need for a larger number of apprentices and clients lead them to the capital where through the miscegenation of different shamanisms and ethnicities the differences between Buryat, Khalkha and Darkhat shamans might lessen and a more homogeneous Mongolian shamanism that never existed before might emerge.

Notes on contributor

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