

Revival of Indigenous Practices and Identity
in 21st Century Inner Asia

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Abstract

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Scholars and observers have noticed an emerging pattern in the world wherein communities that have suffered a period of cultural and religious repression, when faced with freedom, experience a sudden surge in certain aspects of cultural practice. The most interesting of these are the so-called “involuntary” practices, such as trance, and spontaneous spirit possession. Why is it that, in the period of freedom when many missionary groups, traditional and foreign, arrive to make claims on souls, we see a disproportionate resurgence of indigenous, non-missionary practices? And why especially those practices in which the practitioner has no conscious control?

I aim to explore the significance of the revival of indigenous practices, both voluntary and involuntary, their connection to the assertion of cultural identity after a period of intense repression, and their significance to the formation of development and research approaches in such regions. In this paper, I will look at two examples of cultural revival:

Böö Mörgöl (commonly referred to as “Mongolian Shamanism” or “Tengerism”) in Ulaanbaatar, Republic of Mongolia, and the revival of Gesar cultural and religious practices in Kham, Tibet, primarily in Yushu, Qinghai province, China.

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A special thank you to my mom, Alice Rubin who encouraged me to drag my father to Mongolia for two weeks. And finally, I would like to dedicate this paper to my father, David Rubin, who suffered through horrible rides in ancient, broken down, soviet Russian vans in the far north of Mongolia, just so that I could get an interview with the driver's brother.

Notes on Names and Language Choices

In writing this paper, I have chosen to refer to the indigenous Mongolian religious system as *Böö Mörgöl*, the Mongolian term, rather than the common English choice of “Mongolian Shamanism.” Shamanism does not refer to a single faith, but rather a type of belief system, such as monotheism or polytheism. Shamanism is any practice that includes the intercedence of a person who acts as a medium or channel for a divine entity. Referring to *Böö Mörgöl* as “shamanism” is both a disservice to all shamanic religions by treating distinctly diverse faiths as a single, similar system, and by creating a false dichotomy between these and more common western faiths that use near-identical shamanic techniques in their practices, such as glossolalia in protestant Christianity. I believe that the use of the term “shamanism” is a remnant of colonialist ideals to create a form of Western exceptionalism. Its use continues to promote the idea that all of these less understood faiths are the same and that the more so-called “civilized” faiths are radically different. With this in mind, I have chosen to abandon what I believe to be an anachronistic term and revert to the original Mongolian.

For Tibetan terminology, with the exception of the titles of written works, all names will be written in phonetics. Since the Wylie system, while a standard in academia, is useful only to those with an intimate knowledge of Tibetan writing and spelling, I will only use the Wylie system for the purposes of clarification. Therefore, the name King Gesar will be written Ling Je Gesar Norbu Dramdul instead of *gling rje ge sar nor bu dgra ‘dul*. All terminology will appear either in Wylie following its first mention or, for more common words, in the glossary.

All shamans are referred to by their *Tengeriin Ner*, or sky name. This is their religious name and may or may not have any relation to their legal name, but it is the name under which all shamanic interactions occur. This both provides privacy and separates their religious lives from their secular lives. Even for those who have agreed to use both names, for their privacy, I have chosen to only use the *Tengeriin Ner*.

All Tibetan participants, as they were performing in public or public figures, are referred to by their legal names or official titles. The only exception to this is the Tibetan Transit School Group, which gave the public Lingdro performance in Bodh Gaya in 2012. While most of them were happy to have their names used, as a few were uncomfortable and the interview was conducted as a group, I have decided to have the whole group remain anonymous and referred to only at the level in which they publicly performed.

Finally, since this paper discusses religious beliefs, I would like to quote the Mongolian scholar Manduhai Buyandelger in regards to her work on shamans, as it reflects my view on both the Böö Mörgöl and Gesar religious practices:

“Shamans claim to retrieve knowledge from a supernatural domain. I make no pronouncements on the veracity of this claim, nor do I think it necessary to do so, since I am not a shaman, but rather an observer.”

Revival of Indigenous Practices and Identity in 21st Century Inner Asia

Abstract

Scholars and observers have noticed an emerging pattern in the world wherein communities that have suffered a period of cultural and religious repression, when faced with freedom, experience a sudden surge in certain aspects of cultural practice. The most interesting of these are the so-called “involuntary” practices, such as trance, and spontaneous spirit possession. Why is it that, in the period of freedom when many missionary groups, traditional and foreign, arrive to make claims on souls, we see a disproportionate resurgence of indigenous, non-missionary practices? And why especially those practices in which the practitioner has no conscious control?

I aim to explore the significance of the revival of indigenous practices, both voluntary and involuntary, their connection to the assertion of cultural identity after a period of intense repression, and their significance to the formation of development and research approaches in such regions. In this paper, I will look at two examples of cultural revival: Böö Mörgöl (commonly referred to as “Mongolian Shamanism” or “Tengerism”) in Ulaanbaatar, Republic of Mongolia, and the revival of Gesar cultural and religious practices in Kham, Tibet, primarily in Yushu, Qinghai province, China.

Introduction:

The Significance of Indigenous Revival

The examples of the revivals of Böö Mörgöl in Mongolia and Gesar in Tibet serve as only two of many examples of a worldwide trend in revival of indigenous practices¹.

These also tend to coincide with the liberalization after periods of extreme cultural repression, such as the Cultural Revolution and the Soviet period in China and Mongolia respectively, and also seen in cases such as the periods following Japanese rule in South Korea (Kim, 2014²) and the Civil War in Nepal (Lama, 2013³). This seems to reflect an innate human need to retain and rebuild culture and identity.

One particularly interesting aspect of these revivals is how many are based on semi-involuntary practices, which is to say practices that are not undertaken through the conscious desire or control of the practitioner. These would include trance Gesar

¹ Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam. "Shamans Emerging Form Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope." *Shamans and Violence*. Ed. Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. N. pag. Print.

Brings Plenty, Joe. Telephone interview. 27 Feb. 2015.

Buyandelger, Manduhai. *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2013. Print.

Drolma, Tseyang. *Gling Rje Ge Sar nor Bu Dgra 'dul Rtsal Gyi Rtogs Brjod Las/ Gling Bro Bde Chen Rol Mo Zhes Pa'i Cho Kha'i 'byung Khungs Dang Brgyud 'dzin Bcas Dar 'phel Lo Rgyus Mdor Bsdus Dkar Phyogs G.yul Las Rgyal Ba'i Ki Bswa Zhas Bya Ba Bzhugs So//* ("A Brief History of the Origin, Lineage of Dancers and Diffusion of the Gling Bro Bde Chen Rol Mo Performance" *Tibetan Language*). Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, 2012. Print.

Sarangerel. *Riding Windhorses: A Journey into the Heart of Mongolian Shamanism*. Rochester, VT: Destiny, 2000. Print.

Tamblyn, Ben. "Ancient Dialogue Amidst a Modern Cacophony: Gurung Religious Pluralism and the Founding of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in the Pokhara Valley." *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 22.04 (2002): 81-100. Print.

² Kim, Personal Interview, June 15 2014

³ Lama, Bijay. Personal Interview, August 8, 2013

recitation in Tibet or becoming a shaman in Mongolia. As of yet, very few researchers have delved into the question of why such involuntary revivals are occurring in these particular settings. A most notable exception would be MIT Professor Manduhai Buyandelger and her excellent work “Tragic Spirits” which looks at the repercussions of 60 years of soviet control and the return of Mongolian shamanic spirits and spiritualism⁴.

Such revival, on its surface, could appear illogical in the face of popular voluntary movements and missionary forces entering newly liberalized areas. According to many northern Mongols⁵, there are no true shamans left, causing them to question how a revival is possible and how the current one is occurring (Buyandelgeriyn, 133)⁶. Therefore, these incidences say a lot about the significance of culture and personal identity at both the conscious and subconscious level as well as the need to retain cultural indigenous identity at all costs. Looking at these subconscious revivals can also indicate a great deal a lot about what defines a people’s culture and how they define themselves.

Foreign researchers and international development workers are likely to encounter xenophobia in communities that faced an externally influenced repression of culture, such as the hyper-nationalist “Neo-Nazi” movement in Mongolia⁷ or the attacks on white

⁴ Buyandeler, Manduhai, “Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia” *University of Chicago Press* (2013)

⁵ In discussion of Böö Mörgöl, the northern Mongols generally refer to the Dukha, Darhad or Buryat tribes.

⁶ Buyandelgeriyn, Manduhai. "Dealing with Uncertainty: Shamans, Marginal Capitalism, and the Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia." *American Ethnologist* 34.1 (2007): 127-47.

⁷ Taylor, Alan “A Mongolian Neo-Nazi Environmentalist Walks Into a Lingerie Store in Ulan Bator” *The Atlantic Online*, *The Atlantic*. 7/6/2013

social workers in some of the poorer Native American reservations⁸. It is of the utmost importance that we recognize ourselves as outsiders and learn about the culture of our target communities. By integrating that culture, we allow the target communities' agency in choosing how they envision and build their modernity.

Late 20th and Early 21st Century Inner Asia

Following a period of harsh cultural repression, newly liberalized communities commonly experience a time of great social difficulty⁹. Although scholarly works frequently reference this period, I have as of yet not encountered a standardized name for it. Therefore, for the sake of ease, I refer to it as "the slump". I have chosen to look at this period, especially in Mongolia and, slightly less so, in Tibet.

This is a period, after the repression has ended and personal and cultural liberties have been restored, during which many social norms seem to fall apart (Pederson, 2011). The slump is usually categorized by domestic violence, substance abuse (primarily alcoholism although drug abuse is common as well), and suicide. Although it is easy to see this

<http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/07/a-mongolian-neo-nazi-environmentalist-walks-into-a-lingerie-store-in-ulan-bator/100547/>

⁸ Craig, Bonnie Heavy Runner; Horejsi, Charles; Pablo, Joe; "Reactions by Native American Parents to Child Protection Agencies: Cultural and Community Factors", The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/appendix-cultural-legal-articles/reactions-native-american-parents-child-protection-agencies-cultural-and-community-factors>

⁹ Pedersen, Morten Axel. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011. Print.

Drukmo Kyi. Personal interview. Jan. 2015.

Marat, Erica. "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: *The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*." *Problems of Post-Communism* 55.1 (2008): 12-24. Print.

pattern in communities like the Native American communities in the USA, First Nations in Canada, and the newly democratized Republic of Mongolia, it is easy to dismiss these as the issues of communities in economic dire straits. However, the same issues struck South Korea, one of Asia's economic powerhouses in the generations following independence from Japan and the end of the Korean war. Similar to politically comparable but economically poor regions like the post-Soviet republics and Mongolia, the wealthy republic of Korea has likewise faced major social struggles. As of 2012, despite its wealth, South Korea had the highest rates of suicide in Asia and third highest in the world with 41.7 male and 18 female suicide deaths out of 100,000 per year, trailing only Lithuania and Greenland¹⁰. South Korea ranks number one in Asian Alcohol consumption and 17th in the world following, presumably not coincidentally, 12 countries from the Soviet block¹¹.

Mongolia is experiencing a similar slump. Korea has had comparative cultural and religions freedom since the end of the Japanese occupation in 1949, while Mongolia is a democratic newcomer, only achieving cultural freedoms in 1990. 10.8% of Mongolian men have what the WHO describes as an "Alcohol use disorder" and cirrhosis of the liver causes death in 78.8 men and 47.6 women out of 100,000 deaths (as compared to traffic

¹⁰ World Health Organization "Mental Health: Age-standardized suicide rates (per 100 000 population)" 2012. World Health Organization.
http://gamapserver.who.int/gho/interactive_charts/mental_health/suicide_rates/atlas.html

¹¹ World Health Organization "Appendix I: Alcohol Consumption", 2014
http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/msb_gsr_2014_3.pdf

accidents at 34.5/7.0)¹². Suicide rates in Mongolia are unavailable, but the WHO reported that 19.2% of Mongolian students have seriously considered suicide within the six months prior to survey and 8.4% reported actually having attempted suicide¹³. In the tiny northern Bayan-Uul district, with a population of only 4,737¹⁴, in 2006 the rate of suicide had reached at least two people per month¹⁵.

Numbers are unavailable for the Kham region of Tibet, however despite some liberalization, it could be argued that the Tibetan people have not reached a situation liberalized enough so as to be conducive to the slump period.

One force that appears to retrieve people, especially youths from falling into the slump is cultural identity. Although extensive formal research has not been conducted on this topic, examples are starting to show a pattern which, hopefully will eventually provide the framework for formal study. According to Joe Brings Plenty (Mnicoujou Oglala Lakota), chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in Montana, youths who are involved in traditional Lakota language and ceremony are less likely to drop out of school or experiment with drugs (Brings Plenty, 2015)¹⁶. Heather Skye (Oglala Lakota),

¹² World Health Organization "Mongolia" Fact Sheet, 2014.

http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/profiles/mng.pdf

¹³ World Health Organization "Health of Adolescents in Mongolia" World Health Organization: Western Pacific Region, 2012.

http://www.wpro.who.int/topics/adolescent_health/mongolia_fs.pdf

¹⁴ "Dornod Aimag Sums" Dornod Library, 2006. http://dornod-library.mn/?option=com_content&view=article&id=78%3A2009-04-07-08-53-42&catid=40%3A2009-04-06-02-54-02&Itemid=83&showall=1

¹⁵ Buyandelgeriyn; 2007, 129.

¹⁶ Brings Plenty, Joe. Telephone interview. 27 Feb. 2015

founder of Arrows Charity, noted the same among youths who were raised in a Lakota cultural group home, while Lakota children who were fostered out to white families face similar issues of depression, identity issues and suicide rates remain high (Skye, 2014)¹⁷.

The cases of Korea and native tribes in the United States inspired me to look at and attempt to understand the causes of the revivals in Tibet and Mongolia. When we look at these cases, the running narrative seems to be one of repression, liberalization, a collapse of social order, and then some sense of rebuilding through indigenous practices and ownership of traditional identity. Considering these cases, I want to look at cases in Tibet and Mongolia where the revival is active and flourishing. I ask why do these revivals occur at the period of liberalization after repression and why is this important to the creation or recreation of identity. Finally, how can this revival-inspired identity be of benefit to the participants?

Research Methods

In order to conduct this research, I relied primarily upon my own field research, in concert with the existing literature on both subjects. I travelled extensively to India, spending more than three years in Tibetan communities in Northern India between 2009 and 2015, and partaking in Gesar activities. I have also worked with and observed *Gesar Tsokpa*¹⁸ in the United States and abroad. I travelled to Mongolia three times between 2013 and 2015, spending a total of approximately five months living within communities of believers in Böö Mörgöl and attending public ceremonies.

¹⁷ Skye, Heather. Telephone interview. 2 Dec. 2014.

¹⁸ ge sar tshogs pa: Gesar groups, usually referring to an organization that formally practices the Gesar tantric religious practices or formal Gesar research

I conducted two literature reviews, one in regards to works on Böö Mörgöl and one in regards to Gesar traditions and revival. Both subjects have a dearth of modern, reliable works in their non-native languages. I relied on texts in Tibetan, Mongolian, and English, comparing these with my own observations and the limited academic works in the field.

Mongolian resources proved to be especially challenging. There are very limited works on Böö Mörgöl and even fewer which look at Böö Mörgöl in the cities. Most works, such as Morten Axel Pederson's *Not Quite Shamans*, Manduhai Buyandelger's *Tragic Spirits*, and Sas Carey's *Reindeer Herders in My Heart* concentrate only on the peoples and practices of northern Mongolia: the Darhad, Buryat, and Dukha¹⁹ ethnic groups respectively.

Scholarly work that examines the actual practices of Böö Mörgöl, as opposed to the anthropological or sociological contexts, proved even more challenging. Most of these works, such as the works of Sarangerel, while technically accurate in their descriptions of ceremonies, initiations, and sacred songs were written to target the new-age crowd.

Books with titles such as "Riding Windhorses" or "Chosen by the Spirits" are meant to serve less as sources of ethnographic study than a of shamanic self-help book of sorts.

¹⁹ The tribe of reindeer herders of the far north of Khuvsgul, the Taiga region. More commonly known as the "Tsaatan", which literally means the "Reindeer People" the Dukha prefer their own name based on the Tuvan language rather than "Tsaatan" which they view as derogatory as it implies they are literally people with reindeer antlers.

Sections encouraging people to find their shamanic calling or try ceremonies are especially problematic from a traditional Böö Mörgöl view point, according to the numerous shamans I spoke to, as only one who is truly chosen by the spirits and confirmed by an initiated, legitimate shaman, can partake in such practices without danger. As such, I had to read these books with some skepticism in regards to their reliability. However, Sarangerel's descriptions of ceremonies and the like were quite accurate and so I use these works to complement my own fieldwork observations and use these works to triangulate my evidence and arrive at credible findings.

In order to research Böö Mörgöl in Mongolia, I conducted a literature review of the limited existing research. I then travelled to Mongolia three times between the summer of 2013 and autumn of 2014. During that time I lived in the Tolgoit ger district of Ulaanbaatar, on the north west side of the city. I lived with a Mongolian family and was able to witness many public ceremonies involving shamans and bonesetters. I also travelled up to the northern province of Khuvsgul, where I was able to attend Darhad shaman ceremonies.

I faced several challenges while conducting this research. First and foremost, there is very little work on the subject of Böö Mörgöl. Much of what has been written was either written by outsiders without good access to the culture or during a period in which there was a great deal of prejudice in writing about non-Christian religions. Due to these reasons and the aforementioned challenge to finding works about Böö Mörgöl, finding scholarly works proved difficult.

When choosing whom to work with on this project and which shamans to speak with and observe, I was faced with the question of how much effort I should put into attempting to broad and varied sampling, versus a more narrow sampling in which I could work in greater depth. It became clear almost immediately that, thanks to having a rapport with several shamans of related *otog* (lineages), I could work closely with them, but only work on the surface with shamans I did not know well. I therefore decided that instead of having a range of shamans from a broader range of *otog* with whom to research, but only a surface level understanding of their work, I would work with these related *otog* in depth.

As a result of this choice, I was invited to attend ceremonies that, although public, I would not have been informed of without building an excellent rapport with these shamans, their friends, and fellow *otog* members. Furthermore, as the shamans, bonesetters, and attendants came to better know me and my research, they went out of their way to point out or explain things which I would not have known were important. This was in direct contrast to the rather rote ceremonies and explanations that shamans with whom I had no connections would give to me. The vested interest in my success, by virtue of me being a friend of their *otog* members, inspired them to help me understand even when I did not know that there was a question to be asked.

The language barrier was another challenge. My intermediate Mongolian served well enough to get by, but it made understanding details difficult. Although shamanic

ceremonies were open to the public, many Mongolians are uncomfortable attending. Böö Mörgöl is more popular among the migrants, many of whom are poor and less educated. For Mongolians unfamiliar with Böö Mörgöl, the practices can seem scary. Many were afraid it involved black magic or ghosts or evil spirits might follow them. As a result, there were many times where I either had a non-professional interpreter who spoke only limited English or no interpreter at all, as the available interpreters were afraid to attend such ceremonies.

Also I also faced several physical challenges during this course of study. Not only were the living conditions in Tolgoit quite difficult, but in order to partake in ceremonies I had to occasionally consume copious amounts of alcohol. When I first arrived in Mongolia I was a teetotaler. I had to train myself to be able to physically make it through ceremonies. I also badly injured my ankle during my third week of research and could no longer sit in the proscribed ceremonial fashion.

I could deal with physical difficulties most easily. Most shamans were willing to accommodate my injury and considered it a valid excuse to sit in a culturally inappropriate manner. Likewise, although I had to learn how to drink, shamans and their attendants were eager to help me either refuse, if such was acceptable at the time, or be safely taken care of if I was forced to drink.

Of these issues, the language issue proved most difficult. Although I managed to work with several interpreters, there were times when there was no one available. Fortunately,

through a dictionary, my basic Mongolian, and patience we were generally able to understand each other. The difficulty in finding a translator helped illustrate for me many of the fears and hesitations that many of the majority ethnicity, more well-to-do Mongolians had about Böö Mörgöl. One interpreter, for example, hesitantly agreed to go to ceremonies, but after a ceremony involved ghost removal, he declined further invitations to interpret. Other potential interpreters refused for fears of interacting with spirits or attracting black magic. One interpreter insisted that we cleans ourselves with juniper smoke after meeting a shaman that she felt must have been a black magic practitioner. Thus, although the issues with interpreters were a hindrance, they illustrated important aspects of views on Shamans in Mongolian society.

I am also in an unusual position whereby I am considered by Mongolian culture to be Mongolian, despite being only of minor Kalmyk Mongolian descent. Furthermore, having been raised in the United States by a non-Mongolian-Identifying family, I was not raised with an understanding of Mongolian cultural values. As a result, I was unaware of some cultural taboos, but was given less leeway than one who is considered a foreigner.

Finally I would like to say that it is not my intention to summarize Böö Mörgöl. Böö Mörgöl is not a standardized or organized religion. Even among the shamans I spoke to, they said that they could not summarize Böö Mörgöl (Tudu, 2014)²⁰. Therefore it is not my intent to create a comprehensive summary of Böö Mörgöl, but rather explain it in the context of revival of Mongolian identity.

²⁰ Tudu. Personal interview. 09 Sept. 2014

My research on Gesar began as a personal passion for the topic rather than an academic research project. Before formally conducting this research, I visited Tibet three times between December of 2007 and March of 2009, primarily visiting the eastern regions of Kham and Amdo²¹ where the epic is most pervasive. I also researched the Gesar epic singing tradition in Himachal Pradesh, India while residing there from June 2009 until June 2012. Following this period, I conducted research through frequent telephone interviews to Tibet and with Gesar scholars and practitioners residing abroad. In December 2012, returned to India for one month to join thousands of Tibetan pilgrims in Bodh Gaya to witness a rare public performance of the Lingdro tantric dances as led and taught by the current lineage holder and a direct descendant of the Mukpo Dong tribe of King Gesar's lineage²². During this time, I was able to interview Tibetans from around the world, Lingdro dancers, Gesar religious practitioners, lineage holders and religious authorities. I also worked with Gesar practitioners and additional Lingdro organizations in Europe and the United States. In working with these groups, I hoped to learn why they would chose to devote a substantial portion of their life to learning highly technical tantric practices, and especially why young people in places like the United States would chose to devote their free time to Gesar rather than the more common pursuits among Tibetan youth.

²¹Included in what are now labeled Qinghai, Sichuan and the eastern corner of Xizang provinces.

²² Although considered direct descendants of Gesar, Gesar had no biological children and they are therefore descendants of his step-brother's son, whom Gesar adopted after the father's death.

I recorded interviews, videos and photographs of Lingdro practices, and collected popular media on the topic of Gesar. I attempted to analyze these qualitatively to try and understand what drove young Tibetans to be so passionate about a 900 year past legendary king. My subjects then taught me, by explaining their own observations and interpretations of Gesar practice, media, and culture, a grander significance of Gesar which cannot be summarized in the traditional Gesar literature and practice texts alone.

Chapter 1: Mongolia: Böö Mörgöl in 21st Century Ulaanbaatar

Introduction

Since 1990 and for the first time in hundreds of years, Mongolians have experienced true cultural freedom and freedom of religion. For the first generation to live without memory of colonization or foreign control, this period has been a confusing one accompanied by a complete economic collapse and the social pressures to conform to a foreign defined idea of modernity. Missionaries are pushing Christianity and Buddhism, but Böö Mörgöl is growing much faster. This is especially interesting as becoming a shaman is involuntary and often not wanted. Many shamans claim to not even have believed in Böö Mörgöl prior to their selection by the spirits. They are forced into the position of being safe keepers of ancient Mongolian spirits and customs in 21st century Mongolia.

Mongolia: An overview

Mongolia is a landlocked country north of China spanning over 600,000 square miles but with a population of only three million. Of those three million, approximately one and a half million live in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Ulaanbaatar was never meant to hold

so many people, and urbanization results from several major upheavals in the 20th century²³.

From 1921 through 1989, Mongolia was an unofficial satellite state of the USSR. Although technically an independent socialist state after the revolution led by Sukhbaatar, in reality Mongolia was controlled remotely by the hand of Moscow. By the end of the Soviet/Socialist era, the USSR was providing one third of Mongolia's GDP²⁴. When Mongolian's revolted in 1989, bringing about Mongolian democratization in 1990, this accompanied by the collapse of the USSR brought about the first of a series of economic shocks. The next would be in 1993 when the World Bank, in return for aiding Mongolia, demanded sudden decollectivization in a process known as "Shock Therapy" which caused mass poverty in the country side (Mortenson, 22), and most recently a series of *zud*, or extreme winters which have killed off the livestock of thousands of Mongolian herders. *Zud* have taken place every few years of the early 21st century, with the worst being in 2010, killing approximately 4.5 million head of livestock²⁵. All of these contributed to the mass migration to Ulaanbaatar, bringing the population of the city from 548,400 in 1989 to 760,077 in 2000 and to well over 1.3 million in 2013²⁶.

²³ Forrest, Brett "James Passin, the American Who Bought Mongolia" Bloomberg Business. 05/16/2013 <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2013-05-16/james-passin-the-american-who-bought-mongolia>

²⁴ Weidman, John C. and Brian Yoder, "Policy and Practice in Education Reform in Mongolia and Uzbekistan during the First Two Decades of the Post-Soviet Era" *Excellence in Higher Education* 1 (2010):57-68 (57)

²⁵ The Economist, "Mongolia's Zud: Bitter Toll" *The Economist, Asia* 03/31/2010 <http://www.economist.com/node/15826325>

²⁶ "Mongolia" City Populations <http://www.citypopulation.de/Mongolia.html>

The result has been a city with 272 people per square kilometer, many, if not most, of whom are migrants from the country side. The city is split into nine districts and 121 Khoroo, or sub districts. Unlike many western countries, which will have an urban, suburban, and rural area, the split in Ulaanbaatar is unique to central asia. Within the city limits exist two styles of living, “city” (höt) and “ger district”.

City life is relatively standard of a post soviet, modern capital city. People live in apartments ranging in size and quality, but which have private bathrooms, running water, and furnace or central heating. They have regular electricity and are connected to a city sewer system. Many of the poorer residents live in bedsitting apartments with a sofa that converts into a bed, a kitchen barely wide enough to hold the stove and a strangely large bathroom. Family members poorer than them may visit to take advantage of the bathroom, a situation that can end up with roughly fifteen people taking up all available space of the apartment floor to sleep.

The ger district takes the role that “suburbs” would in most other societies. Its district forms a ring around central Ulaanbaatar with occasional peninsulas that encroach into the city, such as near Gandan Hiid (see figure 1). The ger district consists almost exclusively of recent migrants who have found a space of land, demarcated it with a scrap “fence”, and started building. There is little to no city planning. People build houses with what they have available: often scrap wood and old railroad ties. Within the *hasha*, or property yard, there likely will also be a *ger* (popularly known by its Russian name of a yurt) which is the permanent home of yet another family, hence the name of the district.

Other than the homes lining the few main roads connecting the *höt* to the ger district, there are almost no paved roads. Few roads are even navigable by car. When it rains, the dips in the road may fill up by five or six feet.

Homes do not have running water and rely on daily trips to a “water kiosk” to bring home that day’s water. Bathing is done either through sponge baths or visits to bathhouses, advertising *haluun uus*, hot water, that line the main roads. Electricity is precariously tapped off of overhead lines. Toilets are scrap wood outhouses in which one balances dangerously on rotting wood boards over deep pits.

The hasha are bereft of grass, filled with beige dirt and dust. Chained in each hasha is at least one guard dog: a German shepherd or a Tibetan mastiff mutt. The fences surrounding the Hasha are closed with rusted iron doors, thin enough that holes have broken through the rust. They close with a bolt on the inside, so when families leave and re-enter, the husband (or an especially agile wife) will climb over the fence and leap down to the inside. It doesn’t inspire confidence in security.

Residents warm their homes with antique iron stoves, in which they burn whatever they can find. It is, therefore, no surprise that the ger districts contribute 84% of Ulaanbaatar’s air pollution.²⁷ In summer, they will burn wood, cardboard and scrap paper. But during the lean winter months, plastic and tires heat homes and fill the houses and *ger* with an acrid smoke that burns the eyes and gives children a hacking, consumptive cough.

²⁷ Geminiano, Chris. "Norovsuren: Ger Districts Will Not Exist in the Future." The UB Post. N.p., 7 Aug. 2014. Web. <<http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn/?p=11230>>.

60% of Ulaanbaatar residents live in these ger districts²⁸.

Outside of the höt and ger districts, the region immediately transits to rural Mongolian pastures.



Figure 1: Map of Central and Northern Ulaanbaatar. The northern Ger district is highlighted and Tolgoi is circled. Here, one can see the massive expanse of the ger district, home to the new migrants who have flooded into Ulaanbaatar in the past 30 years. It is also possible to see how the ger district and city district press directly against each other. The Tolgoi district, circled in the upper left, was the location of most of my research and is approximately 10 km outside of the city center. Google Satellite Image, Ed. Amalia Rubin

²⁸ Barria, Carlos “Approximately 60 percent of the population of Ulan Bator, Mongolia, live in settlements known as ger districts” Reuters, *Thomson Reuters Foundation* 08/07/2013 <http://www.trust.org/item/20130807113807-0rs9x/>

An Overview of Religion in Mongolia

According to the 2010 Mongolian census, Mongolians religiously identified as the following:

- 53% Buddhist
- 3% Muslim (Mostly Kazakh)
- 2.9% Böö Mörgöl
- 2.1% Christian
- 0.4% Other
- 38.6% Atheist/Agnostic²⁹

However, these statistics are somewhat misleading. All throughout Mongolia, one will see a constant presence of Böö Mörgöl influence. Many of the so-called cultural laws of Mongolia, the *yos* which I will discuss in detail later, are based on Böö Mörgöl's laws of heaven. For example, the taboo against pointing ones feet towards the stove or putting garbage directly in the fire are both based on the ancient indigenous belief that the fire is a sacred household deity. However, the concept of *believing* in shamans or the sky is such a foreign one to most Mongolians that few identify as believers in Böö Mörgöl. Unlike other religions in Mongolia which are referred to as *shashin* (religion) for example *Lalyn Shashin* (Islam), *Hristosyn Shashin* (Christianity) or *Buddyn Shashin* (Buddhism), Böö Mörgöl does not refer to itself as a *shashin*. Böö Mörgöl literally means "Petitioning a shaman." It is a way to function in life while following the laws of heaven. Belief, therefore, in Böö Mörgöl is illogical to many Mongolians and may be best summarized by Sir Terry Pratchett in his Discworld novel "Reaper Man":

"Wizards don't believe in gods in the same way that most people don't find it necessary to believe in, say, tables. They know they're there, they know they're there for a purpose, they'd probably agree that they have a place in a well-organised universe, but they wouldn't see the point of believing, of going around saying "O great table, without whom we are as naught." Anyway, either the gods are there whether

²⁹ 2010 Population and Housing Census of Mongolia. Data recorded in Brian J. Grim et al. Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2014. BRILL, 2014. p. 152

you believe in them or not, or exist only as a function of the belief, so either way you might as well ignore the whole business and, as it were, eat off your knees.”³⁰

For many Mongolians who profess to be atheist, this is an excellent metaphor for their beliefs. Most Mongolians who I spoke to who identified as atheist or agnostic would, after a few minutes of pondering their beliefs state as though stating the obviously “Well, I believe in the sky, of course.” (Shagdarjav, 2013)³¹

Furthermore, belief and practice of Böö Mörgöl is hardly exclusive. Many practitioners of the other *shashin* will also follow Böö Mörgöl. Many Buddhists, and even some Christians will attend shamans. Muslims in Mongolia fall into a separate category as most are of Kazakh ethnicity which has its own unique shamanic tradition.

Basic Concepts of Böö Mörgöl

Although there is no standardization of Böö Mörgöl or the Siberian Shamanic traditions, all scholars and shamans I encountered were able to agree on certain basic beliefs. These beliefs stretch beyond Mongolia and well into Siberia and much of the Central Asian Steppe³². All power comes from *Tenger*, which is the eternal blue sky. *Tenger* is an omniscient deity and the only true God in the western sense. In that sense, Böö Mörgöl is essentially a monotheistic practice. *Tenger*’s power is then channeled through *ongod* (spirits, singular *ongon*) who may live in the heavens, or at very least constantly can

³⁰ Pratchett, Terry. “Reaper Man”. London: Victor Gollancz, 1991. Print.

³¹ Shagdarjav, Ganbat. Personal interview. 29 June 2013.

³² Buyandelger, Pederson, Sarangerel, Eliade etc.

directly interact with them. A spirit may possess an *ulaach*, which is a shaman-as-medium. From there, the spirit can directly interact with the petitioner.

The shaman him or herself may also be used as a conduit of Tenger's power. Thereby the shaman may have direct healing or fortunetelling abilities that are granted by Tenger.

Another player in the shamanic spectrum is the *Bariach* or bonesetter. The Bariach is a healer who works with a combination of spiritual energy healing, massage, bone setting, and often other techniques such as acupuncture, cupping, or moxibustion. Bariach and shamans are not mutually exclusive. Many bariach are shamans, but one does not need to be one to be the other. A shaman can be not a bariach but be possessed by a spirit who is a bariach, a bariach may or may not be a shaman. But for a bariach who is not a shaman, they must either gain their power through inheritance, which traces its roots back to Tenger, or a shaman may directly transfer some of their power which they have received from Tenger to the bariach recipient. This 'seed' power must incubate within the bariach for a period of time before the bariach can likewise grant power on to someone else, however they can begin doing spiritual healing as well as physical manipulation at that point (Selem, 2013)³³. The Bariach, now a holder of power from Tenger may now use that power to treat patients, who while within the influence of Tenger's powers are usually not receptacles of it themselves. (See figure 2)

³³ Selem. Telephone interview. Dec. 2013.

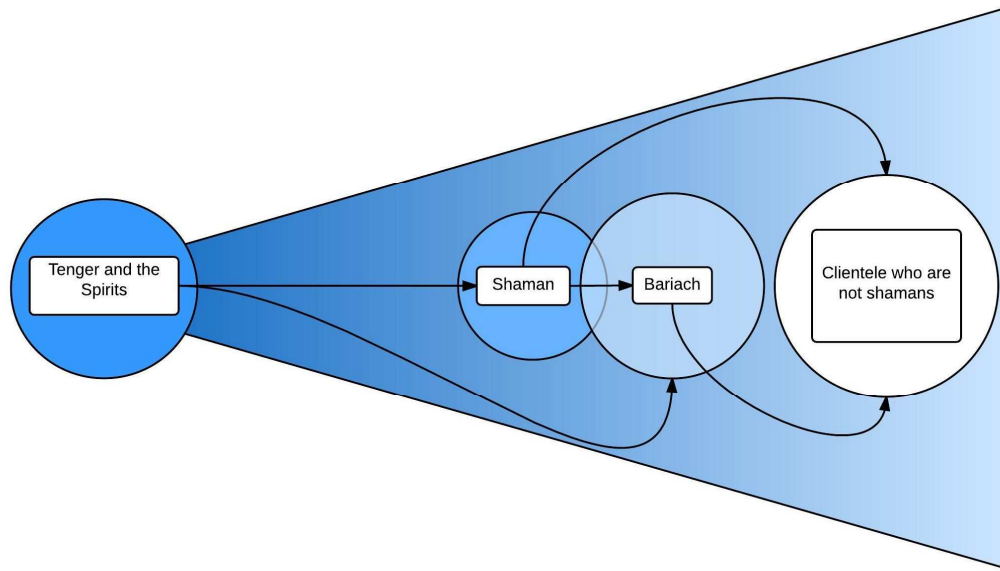


Figure 2: Chart of Magical Influence as described by practitioners of Böö Mörgöl.



Figure 3: (l-r) A shaman, bone setter, and another shaman. The shamans are marked by the large mirrors hanging around their necks and rope “snakes” sewn on their robes. The mirrors indicate that they are shamans while the “snakes” are earned as they receive more initiations. The bone setter, while not a shaman, is within the shamanic system. As a mark of this, this bariach is wearing only a single “snake.” Photo by Amalia Rubin

Western so-called “neo shamans”, as defined by the likes of Michael Harner³⁴, have an alternate viewpoint whereby “There are two types of shamans—those who have been initiated by the earth, and those who have been trained by other shamans.”³⁵ This popular mindset among western new-age believers allows these neo-shamans to declare themselves. However, this is in complete opposition to most shamanic societies, including those of the Mongolian and Siberian areas. For them, one does not choose to become a shaman.

Instead, shamans are supposed to be “chosen by the spirits.” This choosing is usually accompanied by a strange shamanic illness. The illness may have physical or psychological symptoms, or even be a bout of unusually bad luck (Buyandelgeriyn, 2007 135). After the potential shaman is not healed by doctors or lamas they will in desperation usually turn to a shaman. The shaman’s spirits will then diagnose the person as a shaman-to-be and that in order to be healed they must accept their calling and take on their spirits. A more senior shaman will guide them in learning how to be a shaman and conduct ceremonies.

This choosing itself can be a major point of contention. Many young people do not want to become shamans. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer relates the story of one Sakha pre-shaman who was so desperate not to become a shaman that she sacrificed her own life:

³⁴ Harner, Michael *The Way of the Shaman*. 1980, new edition, HarperSanFrancisco, 1990

³⁵ Kelly, John Farrell “Entering Water: Sea Lion Shamanism” *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* Vol 6, no.2 June 2012 56-76 (56)

“They are trying to make me an udagan³⁶, but I will not. I do not want my successors to have this burden, to be ill like this, and to suffer. So I refuse. They [the spirits] will take me in three days.³⁷” Furthermore, many Mongolians are concerned that this choosing might actually be an attempt by a charlatan shaman to gain more clients or money from expensive initiation ceremonies³⁸.

Religions are often either vertical or horizontal, as described by Stephen Hugh-Jones³⁹. Vertical religion is defined predominantly by “Esoteric knowledge transmitted within a small elite.” (33) For example, the sacred transmissions of Tantric Buddhism from teacher to students. Horizontal religions, on the other hand, more strongly emphasize being “more democratic, depend[ing] less on ‘saying’ than on ‘doing’.” And may, in shamanic type religion be more likely to involve “the more classic shamanistic features of trance and possession.” (Ibid.)

Thus, shamanic practitioners whether shamans or bariach, are reliant on both trance from Tenger directly and a hierarchy of inheritance and teachers. In this way, Böö Mörgöl is uniquely both a system of vertical and horizontal inheritance. Vertically, students rely on teachers who rely upon their teachers. Also, those who must become shamans should be

³⁶ “Female shaman”

³⁷ Balzer, Marjorie M. “Shamans Emerging from Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope.” *Shamanism and Violence: Power, Repression and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Conflicts*, Ed. Riboli, Diana and Davide Torri. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013.

³⁸ Buyandelgeriyn, 2007. 140

³⁹ Hugh-Jones, Stephen. “Shamans, Prophets, Priests, and Pastors.” Ed. Caroline Humphrey. *Shamanism, History, & the State*. Ed. Nicholas Thomas. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1996. 32-75. Print.

descended from former shamans. There is a shaman in previous generations or an ancestral spirit calling them. This hierarchical framework is in line with most vertically inherited philosophies.

However, much of the power and legitimacy in Böö Mörgöl is horizontally inherited. Anyone, regardless of birth, belief, or status, may be chosen by the spirits as a vessel. Their spiritual inheritance may not be genetic, although when one considered how many ancestors a single person has even within a few generations, relation to a shaman may simply be inevitable. Furthermore, despite having a genetic lineage and lineage from *bagsh* (teacher) to *shav* (disciple), teachings directly from the spirits, acquired during trance, will trump all other teachings.

Böö Mörgöl is also not an organized religion. Unlike Tibetan Buddhism or Catholicism, there is no organized hierarchy or ranking. In fact, there is an overall lack of standardization in Böö Mörgöl (Tudu, 2014). Different ethnic groups all practice slightly different, for example. As it is not a “religion”, there is very little religious dogma aside from the aforementioned basic structures. Finally, as ultimate authority should come directly from communication with the spirits, there is very little in Böö Mörgöl that is universally true or universally false.

For example, one shaman may say that an *ulaach* must wear blue robes, because blue is the color of the sky. Another shaman may say that this is not true. It is possible that both

are correct, as they have received different commands from their spirits and that these commands apply to them or their *otog* (lineage) only.

Another example is that while marriage between shamans is relatively common among the Buryat people (Buyandelger, 2012), all members of the *otogs* I worked with (who were Khalkha, Khotgod and Durvud) said that two shamans marrying was against the laws of Tenger and was a taboo. It was possible for it to work out, but extraordinarily difficult and could create massive obstacles by the spirits as it would create a conflict of interest in whom the two shamans would serve.

Historical Framework of Böö Mörgöl

Böö Mörgöl is, according to existing resources, the indigenous religion or indigenous religious group of Mongolia. It is closely related to the other shamanic⁴⁰ type religions of Siberia. Some iteration of Böö Mörgöl was the religion of Chingis Khaan. Chingis Khaan, himself, may have been a shaman. According to a contemporaneous text, “The Secret History of the Mongols”, Chingis Khaan not only had faith in Tenger and the spirits, but seemed to have some power from Tenger himself⁴¹. However, whether he was a full shaman has never been confirmed.

⁴⁰ The word “Shaman” comes from the Siberian Evenki language word “saman”. It is fair to say that only the Altaic/Siberian/Mongolian religions, which universally worship “Tenger” can be called “Shamanic”.

⁴¹ Cleaves, Francis Woodman., trans. *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Cambridge, MA: Published for the Harvard-Yenching Institute by Harvard UP, 1982.
Print. Mongolian Title: Mongolyn Nuuts Towchoo

Under the direction of Chingis Khaan's grandson, Kublai Khaan, many Mongols and the state authority converted to Buddhism. Buddhism came to Mongolia in two major waves, both initiating in Tibet and bringing the Tibetan form of Buddhism with them. The first wave of Buddhism was the Sakya (sa skya) school and later the Gelug (dge lug) school. Under the latter, Mongolia created its lineage of Buddhist kings: the Bogd Khaan.

Under the Bogd Khaan's leadership, Gelug Buddhism soon became the majority religion of Mongolia and has remained so until the present day. Gelug Buddhism is the most recent of the major Tibetan Buddhist schools and is considered the "reformist" school. Part of the early Gelug campaigns was to purify the school from what they considered extra-Buddhist influence. Gelugpas⁴² rely on *choekyong* (chos skyong, dharma protectors, *choijin* in Mongolian) who possess *kuten* (sku brtan, medium) whereby the choekyong can speak through the kuten to the community. Famously, even the current Dalai Lama relies on the Nechung Oracle, the most famous of these possessing choekyong. Although Gelugpas rely on such shamanic-type practices, the school itself is openly critical of shamanic practices. This viewpoint is still a major force in modern Mongolia. I encountered this attitude myself several times and others did as well. One believer in Böö Mörgöl, whom I met at a ceremony, had been threatened with disownment by his Gelugpa Buddhist family if he became a shaman.

While Buddhism has taken a strong role in formal society, even a leadership role in government until the 1920s, Böö Mörgöl does not hold such a role in formal society.

⁴² Practitioners of Gelug Buddhism.

Böö Mörgöl is the “feral” forest religion. Buddhism is the religion of the city, viewed as more tame.

The Socialist Period: 1921-1989

From 1921 until 1989⁴³, Mongolia was a socialist state. Although technically not a republic of the USSR, Mongolia functioned as a satellite state, receiving military support, commands, and even one third of their GDP from the Soviet Union. Many Mongolians will say that they were controlled by Russia during this period, despite technical independence. The purges of the 1930s were especially harsh. Not only were tens of thousands of religious representatives killed, but tens of thousands of Mongolian civilians who were deemed “enemies”(Højer , 578)⁴⁴.

Nonetheless, many Mongolians viewed the socialist time as a stable time. Especially for those raised after world war two, the socialist time was stable, even boring (Pedersen, 47). The wilderness and wild life of the Mongolian people, especially in the rural areas, was tamed. All aspects of life that were deemed out of the control of the socialist authorities became banned.

Buddhism was given an unofficial go-ahead by the Soviet authorities. Although monasteries were restricted and many were shut down and destroyed (Buyandelgeriyn;

⁴³ Although the people’s party founded the new government in 1921, they kept the Bogd Khaan as a nominal head until his death in 1924 when the Mongolian People’s Republic was declared. I have chosen to use the date of 1921 as it is the functional start of the socialist period.

⁴⁴ Højer, Lars. "Absent Powers: Magic and Loss in Post-socialist Mongolia." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15.3 (2009): 575-91. Web. (578)

2007, 133.), the Soviets understood that a hierarchical and organized religion such as Buddhism could be both controlled and a source of control over the population. Böö Mörgöl, with its “feral” and uncontrollable characteristics, on the other hand, was clamped down upon.

As uncontrollable mouthpieces of the past, the Shamans represented everything that socialism struggled to repress. Writers and artists across the soviet world were forced to create within the format of “Socialist Realism.” Within this framework, instead of representing history or present reality, they were forced to write as though everything existed within a world in which perfected socialism was not a dream, but a permanent and retroactively established reality. Unlike poets or writers who could produce fiction, shamans were not believed to be in control of the spirits or what they would say (Selem, 2013). When faced with a new client, a spirit might tell their story or with a returning client, demand that they remember the spirits name (Tudu, 2013). Furthermore, the spirits demanded to be remembered as they were and as their actions were and would not lie for the sake of a state that did not propitiate them.

As such, like Buddhism and other religions, shamanism was completely banned during the socialist period. As the singing and drumming of Shamanism could attract the attention of the authorities, many soviet era shamans carried only a tiny drum that could be hidden away easily (Buyandelger, 1.3082), or might have instead resorted to using the aman huur or Jew’s harp.

Others resorted to trickery to preserve their safety while practicing. One famed Buryat shamaness, referred to by Buyandelger as Genen, when religion was banned went directly to the local government office and announced herself as a shamaness. She announced her retirement as “the Mongolian people no longer needed her services as a shaman” (Buyandelger, 1.2823) and then gave a substantial amount of money that she claimed came from her shamanic work. Whether impressed by her honesty or her money, Genen’s name was removed from the list of people to be executed and the local party officials treated her as a county heroine (Buyandelger, 1.2845), which allowed her to freely practice shamanism within her home.

Another shaman, Tömör continued his practice throughout the soviet era through acting the role of an exemplary farmer, so well that he was safe from accusations: “Some of the officers would try to accuse me of being involved in shamanic practices. I would tell the person: ‘What are you talking about? Are you saying that I am involved in such stupid superstitions? If you want to arrest me, then do it now!’” (Buyandelger, 1.4160). When confronted by senior officers about shamanic practices, he lied, claiming he was performing a “zan uil (folkloric tradition) of worshipping the mountain spirits. Such activities serve as an incentive to the locals to protect the environment” (Buyandelger, 1.4180). Although sometimes the authorities truly did not know about these practices, in other cases the rural Mongolian officials turned a blind eye, or would even secretly propitiate the spirits through the medium of the shamans.

Yet, for the vast majority of shamans, socialism was a spiritual, and often physical, death sentences. Although the exact number of shamans who practiced before the socialist period or were killed during it is unknown, researchers after the socialist period were often told that by 1990 “All the real shamans were gone” (Pederson 2012, 5.)⁴⁵

Many shamans converted to Buddhism and integrated semi-shamanic Buddhist practices in order to continue to serve their spirits. The most famous among these was the *lujin* practice, known in Tibetan as *chod* (*gcod*). *Lujin* comes from the Tibetan root *luejin* (lus sbyin) meaning to offer the body, while *chod* means “cutting.” In this practice, the practitioner will visualize himself or herself offering their body to hungry spirits in the ultimate act of selflessness and generosity. Its visual connection with Böö Mörgöl is undeniable: practitioners often even wear a headdress with near identical eye-covering tassels to the kind worn by virtually all Mongolian and Siberian shamans. Interestingly, I also once witnessed the reverse. While attending a public ritual, I was looking at the collection of outfits worn when the shaman was partaking in different rituals. I was interested to find a *lujin* shrine with the Tibetan language text, ritual drum, and face covering next to the red robes of a Buddhist practitioner. When I asked the shaman if he was a *lujin* practitioner, he said that no, but his spirit was.

Like virtually all of the official states of the USSR, Mongolia was subjected to harsh purges and guilt was not only by association, but also by bloodline. To this end, the

⁴⁵ Pedersen, Morten Axel. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011. Print.

Mongolian tradition of written genealogies changed from being a family heirloom to a dangerously condemning document.

Knowledge of one's lineage is an important part of *yos*, or the Mongolian framework of customs. For example, in my first encounter with a shaman, not only did I have to introduce myself as "Amalia, daughter of David" but the very first question I was asked was "Do you know who your father's father's father was?" The beautiful, handwritten genealogies of Mongolian families, written in the old vertical script and passed down from generation to generation might contain more than 10 generations of information (Buyandelger; 2013, 1.3893). When the Soviet purges began, these lovely documents became incontrovertible evidence of relation to unsavory members of society, in the Soviets' eyes. While the state took steps to destroy the immaculately written and calligraphed genealogical records "to strip the upper class of its identity and to create a homogenous society" (Buyandelgeriyn; 2007, 133), other voluntarily burned their own written genealogies to avoid having it used against them. Rather than being cursed for the sins of their fathers, many Mongolian families chose to burn their genealogical documents. In a period of less than a decade, centuries of priceless Mongolian documents were lost.

The true damage, however, was to the psyche of the Mongolian people who were suddenly severed from their ancestors. The immediate result has been a sense of abandonment, and loss of anchorage. I was at a large party once where one man began yelling at the others in the room for speaking English to me, shouting "Are you a true son

of Mongolia?” When we calmed him down, he began crying and telling how he had no father and how so many of the people there were all without fathers.

The spiritual damage, which is perhaps a manifestation of the psychological damage, is no less traumatic. One case is recorded in great detail by Manduhai Buyandelger, the case of a man she calls “Dorji” who had been experiencing unusually terrible luck. When a shaman called Dorji’s origin spirits, the spirit came down angry and cursing Dorji, calling him a “stupid puppet of flesh” for forgetting the origin spirits. The accusations were especially harsh for Dorji who, like many Mongols, had been barred from religious practice and shamanic propitiation during the Soviet era. Furthermore he had no knowledge of his own genealogy, much less what origin spirits might exist within it. The spirit was furious at being abandoned and had not only revoked his protection of Dorji’s lineage, but actively participated in cursing it!(Buyandelger; 2013, l.196)

Ironically, in the midst of this harsh repression and forced-forgetting, Böö Mörgöl integrated certain aspects of communism. It is no surprise that soviet officials residing long term in Mongolia might turn to shamans (Buyandelger; 2013, l.4019). However, it is more surprising to find that a significant minority of shamans began integrating socialist and communist iconography into their altars. For example, if one walks through Narantuul market, one will find busts of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and strangely enough, Hitler. The logic being that if these leaders were so successful in controlling a massive swathe of the globe, much like Chingis Khaan, the spirits must have been on their side. With the communist leaders, when you add the Soviet propaganda that deified them, it is

no surprise that they would be integrated into the Shamanic pantheon. Such appropriation of alternate symbols is common across the world and can be used as a tool to prevent further cultural invasion. For example, among the Amazoninan Arawakans and Tukanoans, in response to Christian missionary forces, they would use Christian imagery and wording in otherwise-native ceremonies. By doing so, they could prove their own cultural autonomy “employing Christian imagery and symbolism, they implied that the missionaries were now redundant.” (Hugh-Jones, 48)



Figure 4: Items for a shamans altar for sale in the shaman area of Narantuul market. In front of the Buddhist images (back row) one can see Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.

Democratization: 1989-Present

In 1989, the Mongolian people rose up against the socialist authorities to demand democratization and human rights. In early 1990, as the result of massive peaceful

protests in the central square of Ulaanbaatar, the socialist Politburo was dissolved and Mongolia declared a democratic republic. This was soon followed by the country's first multi-party elections.

However, in response, the Soviet Union pulled back from its trade with Mongolia. The USSR went so far as to completely stop supplying resource extraction equipment and stop purchasing Mongolian meat, dealing a harsh blow to the two main sources of income in the Mongolian economy (Buyandelgeriyn; 2007, 129). Democratization was followed not long after by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of the one third of the Mongolian GDP which was provided by the USSR. With the end of Soviet bolstering, it became painfully clear how much of the Mongolian economy was a fabrication by the soviets to create the image of a flourishing society (Ibid, 130). Mongolia applied for aid from the World Bank, which, in 1993, agreed to aid Mongolia if Mongolia agreed to decollectivize and take part in what it called "shock therapy". This therapy was indeed a shock especially to people in the countryside for whom the decollectivization created mass poverty.

The economic collapse of 1994 was marked by a sudden rise in cases of *agsan*, wild, violent drunkenness, especially in the northern parts of Mongolia (Pedersen; 2011, 2). These incidences were blamed in part on unpropitiated spirits and were rarely ever blamed on the participants themselves.

The repeat *zud* in the early 2000's, most notably the 2010 *zud* which killed of 4.5 million head of livestock, forced masses of Mongolians to move from the country side to the capital city. Amidst all of this, Mongolia faces several major social crises, most notably high rates of domestic violence, alcoholism, and attempted suicides.

Since the 1990 democratic revolution in Mongolia, shamanism has undergone a massive resurgence⁴⁶. With it has returned the role of the shaman as a storyteller, holder of histories and holder of genealogies. For many families, forced to burn their written genealogies to save themselves from the soviet purges, the shaman remains the only way to recreate a history, which now stops with the last living relative's furthest memories. The shaman could help recreate these genealogies through the ritual songs of address, which included birthplaces, ancestral names, the names of children and so forth (Buyandelger, 1945). Although these may be imagined histories, the shaman's songs and oral transmission of the so-called genealogy serve to connect the Mongolian people to a history stolen by the Socialist period.

In my own experience with several shamans, especially one Durvud and one Khalkh and both living in Ulaanbaatar, the spirits are eager to tell their histories. The Khalkh

⁴⁶ Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam. "Shamans Emerging Form Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope." *Shamans and Violence*. Ed. Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. N. pag. Print.
Buyandelger, Manduhai. *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2013. Print.
Pedersen, Morten Axel. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011. Print.
Sarangerel. *Riding Windhorses: A Journey into the Heart of Mongolian Shamanism*. Rochester, VT: Destiny, 2000. Print

Grandmother Spirit insisted on telling me stories of her travels during her lifetime, many centuries ago, and the countries along the Silk Road she had seen. The Durvud Grandmother spirit asked if I remembered her from a previous trip and demanded I learn her name so that I could properly tell her story and address her.

However, both of these incidents illustrated well that, although the spirits through the proxy of the shamans may be the holders and reciters of the history, it is the duty of the Mongolian people to remember it. Like Chingis Aitmatov's concept of the *mankurt* or one who had forgotten their own culture to such an extent as to forget their own mother, for a Mongolian to forget their ancestry and thus their ancestral spirits was met with great anger.

Böö Mörgöl and Identity

Since 1994, unsurprisingly Böö Mörgöl has moved with the population into the cities (Pedersen, 2011). What are the repercussions of a so-called forest religion moving into the city?

Shamanizing in apartments works very differently from shamanizing in the ger district, both of which are radically different from the rural setting in which Böö Mörgöl evolved. The actual architecture of the houses and gers versus apartments, according to several shamans, has an effect on the ability to shamanize.

According to Selem, a Khalkha shaman, he and members of his otog could not shamanize in an apartment. His attempts to shamanize had failed. When, finally, he succeeded in

bringing down a spirit, the spirit was greatly angered and refused to come again. The source of his anger was the apartment building. He refused angrily stating “I will not come under other peoples’ feet.” As the apartment was multistory, Selem had unwittingly violated a taboo which, while still active in Mongolian society, is ignored in apartment buildings: he was doing something sacred under other peoples’ feet.

For the ger district shamans, their location was ideal. Many had gers specifically for shamanizing, assuming they lived in one of the houses as opposed to a ger itself. Also, most of the houses in the ger district were only one story. Therefore, whether in the house or the ger, the earth was directly below and the sky directly above. If necessary, one could always move outside into the *hasha* and be directly below the sky, an option which was far more difficult within the *höt* (Selem, 2014).



Figure 5: A *hasha* in the Tolgoit ger district. These are the living conditions of roughly 60% of Ulaanbaatar Mongolians.

For special occasions, the ger district shamans (most of whom were already located on the fringes of Ulaanbaatar as is) could go out into the nearby countryside. For example, for a series of public ceremonies with Selem, we drove only 30 kilometers, and only 20 from the center of the city, to find ourselves in the completely open country side, with hardly a person in sight. It was there, at the base of a sacred tree that Selem could conduct special ceremonies. Other ceremonies, led by Manlai, were held only 10 km outside of the city, also an area of completely empty country side, where he had established a sacred circle just beyond a graveyard. The delineation between ger district and the country side (*hudu*) is so sudden that when we stood atop the pristine mountain behind Manlai's sacred circle, an area protected only by a local herder mounted on horse back, we could collect medicinal herbs and see our houses in the distance.

The delineation between city and *hudu* in terms of Böö Mörgöl is far more than physical as well. Ideologically, Böö Mörgöl is supposed to be a forest religion and the forests are primarily in the far north of Mongolia. Many Mongolians feel that the real shamanism is only located in the northern regions like Khuvsgul and the Taiga. City shamans have a reputation as charlatans.

However, if most city residents at this point come from the country side or are first generation born in the cities. Are they truly city people?

Revival of Böö Mörgöl Since 1994

Although experts do not know the exact numbers, they agree that the number of shamans in Mongolia has increased massively and far beyond expectations (Balzer; 2011, 1.221)⁴⁷. While the exact number is unknown, most experts estimate it is well into the thousands. At a recent quite small demonstration in Ulaanbaatar against a mining project on Noyon Mountain, at least 22 shamans came out publicly in full regalia⁴⁸. Considering how many shamans choose to keep their identity private, and this was a single, small, controversial political event on a workday, this number indicates a large presence of shamans in Ulaanbaatar.

Such a revival of spirits or shamanic forces is very common in cases of instability or economic chaos. Andrew Alan Johnson recorded several such cases in Thailand among the migrant workers who flooded into Bangkok in the face of 20th and 21st century economic instability in the desert eastern region of Isaan. Small cults of nature spirit worship spring up across Bangkok, often at road intersections or, annoyingly, in the yards of Bangkok residents (Johnson, 770)⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam. "Shamans Emerging From Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope." *Shamans and Violence*. Ed. Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. N. pag. Print.

⁴⁸ Olsen, Kelly. "Mineral-rich Mongolia Grapples with 'resource Curse.'" Yahoo! News. AFP, 22 Apr. 2015. Web. 22 Apr. 2015.
<<https://sg.news.yahoo.com%2Fmineral-rich-mongolia-grapples-curse-063711654--finance.html>>.

⁴⁹ Johnson, Andrew Alan. "Naming Chaos: Accident, Precariousness, and the Spirits of Wildness in Urban Thai Spirit Cults." *American Ethnologist* 39.4 (2012): 766-78. Web. (770)

These cults often sprung up in direct response to especially bad luck in the region, such as fatal car accidents and mysterious deaths (Ibid. 766). By blaming an unhappy spirit, potential worshippers could create a name for the chaos plaguing their lives. In giving the chaos a name and persona with needs and desires, they could attempt to rein in and control this chaos. Once the chaos was personified as a spirit, it could be placated. In doing so, Thai worshippers were able to attempt to understand and control their chaotic environment.

This chaos is a near mirror of the economic chaos experienced by Mongolians in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The economic shocks of the 90s, loss of livelihood of the 21st century *zuds* all forced a migration from the poorer countryside, much like the Thai migrant workers. Perhaps in naming their chaos as the curses of spirits and lack of luck, Mongolian migrants and those wallowing in the economic quagmire feel that they are able to harness and change the chaos around them. Optimism, among Mongolia's poor migrants, is often accompanied by spiritual names for hope and an imagined, better future (Pederson; 2012, 137). Fortune is the domain of one's *hiimor*, or good fortune, which can disappear through the alternating balance of fortunes, and misfortune may be the fault of angered spirits or curses. In naming them as such, misfortune can be tackled as an entity and the loss of good fortune can still be viewed with optimism for the future (Pederson, 2012. 139)⁵⁰. This view, however, is the view primarily of foreign researchers.

⁵⁰ Pedersen, Morten Axel. "A Day in the Cadillac: The Work of Hope in Urban Mongolia." *Social Analysis Soc Anal* 56.2 (2012): 136-51. Web. (139.)

Different members of Mongolian society have very different views as to why the revival is taking place. Some are positive and some negative. The first reason is an extension of the idea of charlatan shamans, which I will discuss at length later. Many of the new shamans are accused of being charlatans. They may be seeking money through fake ceremonies or donations. They may also be seeking power or publicity. Several shamans I spoke with estimated the real percentage of shamans to be at most ten percent of the new people claiming to be shamans. The rest, they said, were fakers.

A fake shaman teacher could also create a sort of pyramid scheme by ‘recognizing’ new potential shamans and then charging them obscene amounts over long periods of time as their disciples. They could charge for teachings, ceremonies, the creation of ceremonial objects, and the massive initiation rituals and offerings required therein. The new fake shamans might actually even believe themselves to be proper shamans and might even be experiencing trance or ecstasy, an easily induced mental state. When I asked some Zaarin (fully initiated senior shamans) about this, they explained that the teacher might be teaching them techniques, which could, uncontrollably, allow possession and the student would be possessed by ghosts or *savdag* (land protectors) rather than origin spirits (Manlai, 2014)⁵¹. They might be possessed by the wrong spirits either because they were never meant to be a shaman or simply because the teacher was a fraud. In either case, should this harmful possession occur, the possessing ghosts or *savdag* would pretend to be a proper *ongon*, and feed themselves upon the energy and offerings provided by the new “shaman.” After a period of three years, the now-satisfied fake *ongon* would

⁵¹ Manlai. Personal interview. July-Aug. 2014.

disappear, abandoning the shaman (Selem, 2014). At least one three-year initiate shaman I met had been a victim of such a fraudulent teacher and eventually had to be re-taught and rehabilitated under a proper *bagsh*.

Yet despite this number of potentially fake shamans, the number of potentially real shamans is also unusually high. The most theologically based reason is discussed at length by Manduhai Buyandelger, when she asserts that the abandoned *ongod* have returned with a fury, demanding offerings, ceremonies, and propitiation and thus need an expanded number of shamans in order for their voices to be heard (Buyandelger, l.144).

Other theories include bringing back the spirit of Chingis Khaan and bringing back the grandeur of Mongolia (Enkhsaikhan, 2014)⁵². *Böö Mörgöl* also represents the indigenous power of Mongolia, including Mongolian land. For example, not only is the sky above Mongolia the great deity in itself, but the *savdag* are power that are literally the land itself.

For those who believe in the power of the *ongod*, their return in great numbers are to protect Mongolian people against what many view as the selling of their country by government officials (Enkhsaikhan, 2014). They are actively participating in rebuilding the power of Mongolia and hopefully returning it to its former grandeur. As residents of the sky and earth, they are forcibly protecting the land.

⁵² Enkhsaikhan, Zul, and Ankhbayar Batbayar. Personal interview. 07 June 2014.

Finally, a true shaman should be a protector of *yos*, the sacred customs of Mongol life and wellbeing. In the eyes of believers, it is these *ongod* who are forcibly training young people and the next generation of Mongols, separated from *yos*, in how they are to behave. Even if it requires possessing and controlling the body of an unwitting new shaman, the *ongod* will force people to learn *yos*.

Charlatans, Fakers and Prophets for Profit

When mentioning Böö Mörgöl to Mongolians, the inevitable conversation follows. The first is that there are so many fake shamans about. The next comment is that if you want to see the real shamans, you must go north up to Khuvsgul province area. Khuvsgul, ranging from the lake itself and Khatgal town up to the far northern region of the Taiga, is famed for its shamans and shamanic ethnic groups. These include the Darhad and Dukha.

However, according to my experiences and the experience of my sources, we encountered a far higher proportion of shamans who seemed to be fake or seeking profit in Khuvsgul than we did in the ger district.

The concept of fakery is fascinating because it is based in the faith that there must be genuine shamans (Højer; 2009, 579). One cannot believe that a specific shaman is a fake without believing in the possibility that another shaman is real. The idea of the charlatan shaman is anchored in the idea of the reality of the Mongolian spiritual pantheon.

A fake shaman, in Mongolian ideas, may also be a valid channeler who is truly being possessed by something. However, that something might not be their true origin spirits. They may be hungry *savdag* (landscape protectors), abandoned spirits who pretend to be an origin spirit in order to take sustenance from the ceremonial offerings, or worse yet an *uheer*, the angry ghost of a person violently killed and improperly buried (Buyandelger; 2013, 1.417). After using the *ulaach* (medium) for a few years, they abandon the *ulaach*, having drained them of monetary resources and spiritual life force (Selem, 2014). A more type of case involves a dishonest teacher who may initiate an *ulaach* to bring down spirits who are not part of their family pantheon. This may be out of laziness to check on the appropriateness of a given spirit, or the greedy desire to earn more money from the *shav* (disciple) by forcing them to undergo more expensive ceremonies and training (Buyandelgeriyn; 2007, 140). Regardless of the reason, the result can be detrimental to the *ulaach* who is engaging with foreign spirits. The *ulaach* will need to find a more qualified teacher and conduct difficult, often dangerous, ceremonies in order to sever the connection with the foreign spirit (Ibid, 141.)

Although it was impossible to confirm who was a fake shaman, or even if such delineation could exist, my discussion with shamans and believers yielded certain red and green flags, which they used to decide whether or not they felt a shaman could be trusted. Signs of an untrustworthy shaman included making grandiose claims, asking for money outside of cultural norms, demanding money for ceremonies, showing off about their clientele or publicity, showing off about their spirits or skills, a lack of emotional

connection with their spirits, an inability to answer (as opposed to a reluctance to answer) questions about technicalities of their shamanizing, and overtly opposing claims. Signs that inspired my sources to trust a shaman included offers to help without requesting something, a reluctance to discuss one's skills and spirits, a strong emotional connection to one's spirits, and accuracy and care in diagnosis. Within these discussions, my sources also developed four categories of shamans in terms of reliability or fakeness with which we were able to categorize shamans as A1, A2, B1 or B2. An A1 shaman was a completely reliable "true" shaman, with true, impressive and wide ranging spiritual power. An A2 shaman, was a reliable "true" shaman, with a limited range of spiritual powers. B1 was a well-intended shaman who believed themselves to be a "true" shaman, but had no actual spiritual power or connection and a B2 was an outright charlatan who knew they were fake and used their fakery to scam others.

The greater proportion of fake shamans we met were among either the area of Khuvsgul or were from historically famous shamanic ethnicities, such as Buryats, Dukha or Darhad people. On the contrary, we found a higher proportion of more genuine-seeming shamans in the Ger district of Ulaanbaatar. This seemed surprising at first, although the reason seems clear in reflection. If a person does not have a personal connection to a shaman, whether they are foreign or Mongolian, they will go where they have heard the best shamans are: Khuvsgul or among the Buryats. This means that if a fake or for-profit shaman wants to get publicity and money, they know that they will be able to attract people who are easy to swindle if they are in Khuvsgul or claim to be trained by Buryats and so forth. On the contrary, the Ger district is not a place to turn a profit. It is

disregarded, does not attract tourists or people who can be conned into donating copious amounts of money or paying for inappropriate or fake ceremonies. Primarily migrants and the children of migrants, on the other hand, populate the ger district. It is steadfastly avoided by most foreigners and even most non-ger district Mongolians. Shamanizing in the ger district is by migrants, for migrants. Among all of the ger district shamans I met, I was their first foreign client. In a way, there is a higher objective likelihood of being scammed in the far north than in the ger district.

Ironically, this quest for a true shaman and skepticism against Böö Mörgöl forms the basis of much of the shaman economy. When clients seek a shaman, they then will often seek a confirmation or second opinion in order to figure out if the first shaman was correct. The resulting quest means more ceremonies, offerings, and accrued expenses all of which feeds the shaman economy (Ibid, 130.) In an effort to weed out fake shamans and encourage their own skepticism against Böö Mörgöl, clients unintentionally fund exactly what they reject.

Virtually all the shamans I spoke to accused other shamans of being fakers and charlatans, a sentiment repeated in many other documents on the matter⁵³. However, there are occasional cases where the fakery is most pronounced.

During my travels in the far north, I went to see a shaman in an isolated area of Khuvsgul province. Although I had gone to her on high recommendations that she was a great

⁵³ Pederson; 2012, 5 and Buyandelger; 2013, 1.756 for example.

healer, no one had been able to show me any evidence of beneficial activities. When I met her, she told me all about her healing abilities and impressed upon me their strength by telling me that no one in her family needed ever use medicine. A few hours later, as we sat drinking tea with her and her son, she asked if I knew how to place an IV. I was shocked and answered that no, I had never worked with needles. She asked me to try, and I refused. When I asked why she needed someone to place an IV, she pulled out an IV bag and some steroids that she had illegally acquired, asked me one more time to place the IV in order to dope her son for the wrestling competition in tomorrow's Naadam⁵⁴ sports festival. I was struck by the hypocrisy of claiming to be a healer so powerful as to never need medicine while giving her son steroids to illegally win the Naadam wrestling competition.

Such behavior is viewed in direct contrast to the activities of an ideal shaman. One example, referenced by Manduhai Buyandelger, was a shaman man named Luvsan. Luvsan was approached by a woman whose entire wealth consisted of one horse and 100 tugrug (approximately \$0.10), but needed elaborate rituals in order to alleviate her ongoing bad luck. In order for the ritual to work, the old woman needed to offer items she had purchased herself. As such, Luvsan "sold" her a sheep for 50 tugrug, offerings for 10 tugrug and so forth. After the ceremony, Luvsan gave the meat left from the sacrifice as a gift to the woman. As such, he fulfilled his role as an ideal shaman and safe keeper of Mongolian traditional customs (*yos*) of hospitality, generosity, and respect (Buyandelger, 1.7118).

⁵⁴ The annual "Three Men's Games Festival", the summer sports festival featuring wrestling, archery, and horse racing.

Yos and Customs

Yos is often translated as either “conduct” or “customs.” For example, the yostai and yosgui (“with yos” and “without yos” respectively) are used to mean “what is done” and “what is not done”. Yos is more similar to the idea of mitzvot in Judaism than the concept of “culture” or “custom” as it is translated in English. Yos are the frameworks of life under the laws of Tenger. Things that to an outsider might seem just like customs are, within the Mongolian framework, the laws of the divine. These include the ways of greeting people, ways of making and accepting offerings, ways of treating fire and the elements, even ways of digging into the ground. Although these are seemingly cultural, each one is rooted in a deep held belief in positions of the universe and “sky law”. For example, the Ger, as circular, is held as a miniature map of the universe. Each direction has significance. The women’s side and men’s side is not a question of gender differential but the balance of the universe as modeled in the circular home and surrounding the world center, represented by the smoke hole (Sarangerel, 9)⁵⁵. Thus even following the basics of Mongolian customs are forms of respecting the indigenous Mongolian pantheon and beliefs. By respecting and living by yos, one helps keep the balance of the universe.

The rules of yos are varied and complicated. In a children’s guide to yos, published in Mongolia, there are 14 pages of 10 point, single spaced typeface listing the numerous

⁵⁵ Sarangerel. *Riding Windhorses: A Journey into the Heart of Mongolian Shamanism*. Rochester, VT: Destiny, 2000. Print.

do's and don't's that even a child is supposed to know. They range from proper terms of address to exactly how one should step into a ger⁵⁶.

Traditionally, violation of yos would be punished harshly and violently. Caroline Humphrey's *Shaman's and Elders* gives the example of a young man who is deeply cut with a knife for accidentally handing over a knife with his left hand. When he related the story to his father, the father answers "'If you ever hand me a knife with your left hand, I'll cut both your hands'"(25)⁵⁷. During one ceremony I attended, a person entered intoxicated, a massive breach of protocol. The shaman was so infuriated, he threw his cigarette holder and then an iron cup at the offender.

These customs serve as both the guidelines of Mongol life, but also the laws straight from Tenger. Much of yos was forcibly denied during the soviet period when following such customs was viewed as backwards. Rules of respect and honor were especially threatening as they were in direct opposition to the idealized homogenization of society that Socialist Realism envisioned. As a result, significant laws of yos have been lost to the younger generation. Shamans play an important role in bringing Yos back into mainstream Mongol life and they impart their knowledge of Yos in several ways.

A failure to follow yos, without an overt breach, is still shameful as it indicates a lack of knowledge of Mongolian traditional culture. The spirits may shame a person for not

⁵⁶ Mongol Hun: Yos Zanshuldaa Deedeldeg. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print. No publication information on this document.

⁵⁷ Humphrey, Caroline, and Urgunge Onon. *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge and Power among the Daur Mongols*. Oxford, NY: Clarendon, 1996. Print.

knowing yos, although they will not violently punish them as they might for an out and out breach.

The shamans, even when not in trance, are among the safekeepers of Yos. It is part of their duty to teach it to those around them, especially their students. And similar to Aitmatov's critique of the *mankurt* in Turkic society, the shaman scolds those who have failed to internalize Mongolian customs. Manlai, a *zaarin*, related how in teaching his disciples, before they take their first *chanar*, he spends a lot of time teaching them the old, proper way of speaking Mongolian. Not the archaic language, but the proper forms of respect, much of which was lost during the soviet period. He also must reteach them how to live life in accordance with yos. This is because, although in Modern Mongolian society, the details of yos are less important, when working with the ancient spirits, ancient protocol is of extreme importance.



Figure 6: A female shaman at a chanar celebrating the three year anniversary of her first initiation chanar. All Mongolian shamans will wear a headdress with tassels to cover the face during trance possession, in order to protect the viewers from the strength of the spirits and protect the shaman from negative spirits that might attack. This young shamaness wears a fur mantle, an addition requested by her spirits, which may be unique to her costume. The shamaness is also a college student, fluent in English and works in the city center when not shamanizing. Photograph by Amalia Rubin

Challenges Facing 21st Century Shamans

Challenges facing shamans are far from being a new phenomenon. Formal government persecution of shamans actually began during Chingis Khaan's own rule. According to numerous contemporaneous documents, including the Secret History of the Mongols, after establishing his empire, the great Khaan quickly became dismissive of his shamans. When his shamanic council disagreed with some of his actions, Chingis Khaan had them put to death.

While the execution of the Shamanic council may be the earliest recorded formal government persecution of shamans, it is far from the last and continues well into modern day. The pattern tends to be that a government petitions assistance of shamans (who represent power and national spirits) until such time as they have established a solid base of control. At this point, the uncontrollability of the shamans, who's spirits will always be a higher authority than the government, become a potential threat.

Mongolia is far from an isolated case of shamanic prosecution. In democratic South Korea in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, political campaigners would often seek the approval of the Korean shamans, accompanied by lavish promises on the condition that they won. In the case of at least one politician, after winning he reneged on all of his promises. The shamans asked their due, with the unspoken threat of the power of the spirits. What followed was a series of forced disappearances (Kim, 2014).

The persecution of shamans in Mongolia has, aside from Chingis' executions and the socialist purges, tended to be more bureaucratic. During the era of the Bogd Khaans, there were attempts to register shamans. Several current shamans expressed their fear and mentions by the president of registering shamans again (Manlai, 2014). The registration is, allegedly, to cut down on scammers however many shamans are concerned that a devout Buddhist president might wield this power unjustly.

The tension between Buddhists and believers in Böö Mörgöl remains high. In one spontaneous case at a large *chanar*, a young man fell into spontaneous, violent trance, an

undeniable sign of a shaman-to-be. He had suffered from these trances for years, but his family, devout Gelug Buddhists, had threatened to disown and cut him off if he pursued shamanic initiation. The result were ongoing, violent, spontaneous trances. The trance I saw resulted in a broken hand. However, he feels as though he has no way to solve this problem. I, myself, was harshly confronted by a few Buddhist friends who saw that I was hanging out with shamans and even wearing a *sahius* (good luck charm) around my neck. They felt the need to “save” me from shamanic influence.

Böö Mörgöl in 21st century Ulaanbaatar is viewed by many as backwards and illegitimate. There have been attempts to formalize or legitimize Böö Mörgöl, with limited success. Certain groups of shamans have founded the Golomt Center for Shamanist Studies (Sarangerel, 139) and Sacred Heavens associations, but the opinion of most who are not members is that these organizations are corrupt and fake (Selem, 2014). One example non-affiliated shamans often give is the titles that are conferred upon students at the association. They might include academic sounding titles like “masters” or “Doctorate” in things like “the third eye” and so forth. For Zaarin like Manlai and senior shamans like Selem, such titles are an affront to the communal system of Böö Mörgöl wherein titles are the result of communal acceptance (Manlai, 2014). Thus, among many believers and non-believers in Böö Mörgöl, the attempts to legitimize the practice actually serve the opposite purpose.

Among many young Mongolians, Böö Mörgöl is seen as criminal. Almost any time I mention my research to non- Böö Mörgölist Mongolians, the first questions are about

charlatans, scams, and criminal activities. Concerns range from scamming for money, trading illegal and poached goods on the black market (which I never once saw) and noise violations (which definitely occur.) When I lectured on my research at Nagtsadorj Library in Ulaanbaatar, after 50 minutes of explaining the complexities of modern Böö Mörgöl, the only questions I received from Mongolians in the audience were about corruption, crime and fake shamans.

Finally, many of the young shamans face an internal struggle. In a country where 20% of the GDP comes directly from mining⁵⁸, many young shamans don't know whether to get a job that will benefit their families and possibly help with national development, or to honor their spirits who would feel that this mining is a violation of the earth. One shaman chose to take care of his family by taking a road engineering job, another one is living in poverty as his spirits told him not to cut open the mountains, his sister however works for a mining company. A Siberian Sakha family recalls working at one of the largest diamond mines in the world whereupon the local spirits became angry and threatened to harm the couple as well as anyone, regardless of race, who worked at the mine. The family kept the job for a time but eventually left, while others stayed. (Balzer, 1962) The decisions are far from clear-cut. Almost all shamans expressed iterations of the same concern about these internal struggles: living a modern life while being fated to follow rules so old that even many Mongolians don't know them. To paraphrase a young Dukha woman who s fated to be a shaman: The hardest part is living two lives, one in modern Ulaanbaatar and one in ancient history.

⁵⁸ "Mongolia Overview." World Bank. N.p., 25 Mar. 2015. Web. 20 May 2015. <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mongolia/overview>>.

The number of Mongolians moving in to the city continues at a steady pace and shows no sign of slowing. Likewise, the number of shamans rises as well. In the past year alone, at least two of my acquaintances in Mongolia were recognized as shamans-to-be. Events such as the shaman-led anti-mining protests, upcoming Mongolian Shaman earth celebrations, and other highly publicized Böö Mörgöl events indicate that not only is the tradition of Böö Mörgöl flourishing in 21st century Ulaanbaatar, but may also be moving more into the public eye. For the first time in Mongolian history, there exists a generation of young shamans, many of whom are pursuing professional employment and college degrees. As these young people move further into adulthood and take on the mantle of Mongolian leadership, Böö Mörgöl may play a significant role in the new Mongolia.

Chapter 2: The Epic, Culture, and Practice of Gesar of Ling

Introduction

The epic of Gesar of Ling is the world's longest epic poem at 20-40 million words. In Tibet, its epicenter, it has evolved from a work of literature into a way of life and religion. After the repression of the Cultural Revolution, Gesar practice has taken on new strength, meaning and popularity, especially in the region of Kham in south Eastern Tibet. Most notably, the cases of *babdrung*, or Gesar trance reciters, have gone up in numbers to be beyond what they were even before the 1950s. What could be causing this and why is a 900-year-old King's story so significant to modern Tibetans?

In this section, I will explore the cultural, religious, and historical significance of Gesar traditions in Tibet. I will start by introducing Gesar's general significance in modern Tibet, followed by an overview of the epic of King Gesar, and its religious significance, and its historical framework. This will be followed by a more in-depth examination of specific Gesar traditions and how the revival of these traditions is significant in 21st century Eastern Tibet.

Gesar in the Context of 20th and 21st Century Tibet

In popular belief, Tibet remains in the distant past. People perceive of a land of lamas, a Shangri-la, a people untouched by modernity. However, in the second half of the 20th century Tibet was thrust into the modern world, and since that time has been forced to balance what it means to be modern and what it means to be Tibetan. If popular sources on Tibet are to be believed, this balance cannot exist. Many scholars, authors and activists write off Tibetan culture as doomed, or view modernity and Tibetanness as mutually exclusive characteristics:

“[Tibetans] have experience...the near extinction of their respective traditions, languages and populations”

--Evan Mascagni, “The Legal Process of Cultural Genocide” (2010)

“The latest strategy - to encourage Chinese colonization and to promote economic development in the hope that Tibetan culture will be obliterated, and with it Tibetan memory - may succeed in the long term.”

--Isabel Hilton, “Will Tibet's Culture Simply Fade Away?” (2005)

"After visiting Tibet a number of times and sadly realizing that more of the culture exists outside the country than in it, I felt compelled to document the Tibetan life in exile..."

--Wright, Alison, “The Spirit of Tibet.” (1998)

When I went to visit Tibet in December of 2007, I expected to find a culture at war with itself, a split personality between modern Chinese/Western⁵⁹ life and traditional Tibetan cultures. However, instead I witnessed young, modern Tibetans, using their traditions and culture to guide their lives and adapting their culture into a modern form.

One of the most striking examples of this was the continuation of the Epic of King Gesar of Ling and its cultural guidance in modern Tibetan life. Similar to the Manas epic of Kyrgyzstan and other national narratives and legends, the Gesar epic is more than a story. It provides within it the framework of traditional culture moral guidance, role models, legal models and spiritual guidance for the populace (Marat, 12, 2008)⁶⁰. In looking at modern Tibet, I have chosen to concentrate primarily on three aspects of contemporary Gesar culture: oral tradition, spontaneous trance recitation, and Lingdro sacred tantric dances.

The Tale of King Gesar

Gesar tells the tales of the life of a legendary Tibetan king and his conquests. Historians debate as to whether Gesar was a real figure who gained mythic status over time, a composite of several conquerors, a purely fictional character, or even the result of stories of Caesar making their way across the globe!

⁵⁹ Inside of Tibet, many aspects of Tibetan culture are referred to as "Chinese" because they were only introduced after Chinese rule. In the Tibetan mind, therefore, they are one. For example, Tibetan clothing is called "bhoe che" (Tibetan wear) while western clothing is called "gya che" (Chinese wear.)

⁶⁰ Marat, Erica. "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: *The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*." *Problems of Post-Communism* 55.1 (2008): 12-24. Print.

The Epic of King Gesar of Ling, is believed to be approximately 900 years old. Although the veracity of his existence is debated, historical references to similar political activities exist (David-Neel and Yongden, 7, 1934)⁶¹. Some Gesar Scholars believe that Gesar was a real figure whose activities were exaggerated over time (Orgyen, 2013)⁶².

The poem is one of the world's longest epic poems, if not the longest. To add to the length and complexity, the poem continues to expand. Due to the Tibetan belief in reincarnation, Tibetans feel that many figures of the poem are once again alive today (Yangzom et al. 2012⁶³; David-Neel and Yongden, 39, 1934). Some of these recognized tulkus⁶⁴ have contributed to the poem by composing new volumes. Additionally, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of terma, or found treasures, means that additional volumes of poetry are continuously being revealed⁶⁵. Most Tibetan devotees of the poem consider these volumes to be canon. While counts vary, depending on region and which sections are considered valid, modest estimates place the poem at twenty-million words, while more generous scholars, who include all of the termas, place the number closer to forty-million.

⁶¹ David-Neel, Alexandra, and Lama Yongden. *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*. New York: Claude Kendall, 1934. Print.

⁶² Orgyen Trinley Dorje, The 17th Karmapa Lama. E-mail interview. Jan. 2013

⁶³ Yangzom, Pema. Personal interview. Dec. 2012. (Plus three anonymous companions)

⁶⁴ A tulku is a person of high realization who manages to maintain some control over their incarnation. They are considered a direct incarnation of their predecessor.

⁶⁵ Terma are sacred texts or revelations, believed to be hidden physically or magically by realized masters. Physical forms would include things such as a book hidden in a cave while metaphysical forms would include things like *gongter*, "mental treasures" that may appear in a realized teacher's mind through visions or dreams.

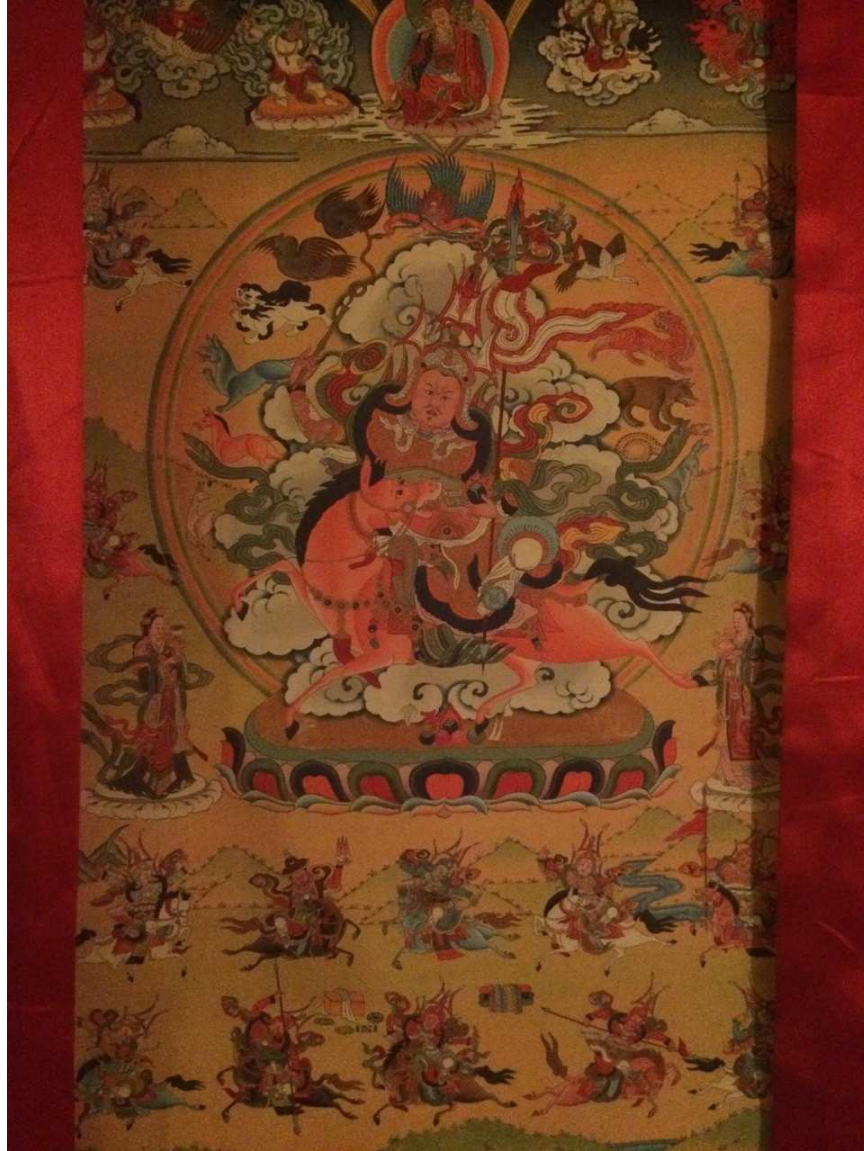


Figure 7: Gesar and his Thirty generals. This is a traditional religious depiction that features Gesar as part of the Nyingma Buddhist pantheon, below Guru Rinpoche. Such an image might be hung in a shrine room or temple as an object of meditation or devotion. From the private collection of Amalia Rubin.

The Epic of Gesar of Ling tells the story of a conquering king through the framework of the early struggle for Buddha Dharma to thrive in Tibet. Gesar is an incarnation of the bodhisattva Thopagawa, sent to earth by Guru Padmasambhava, the saint who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet. His earthly birth is solely for the purpose of slaying the demons who have been born on earth in order to destroy the Dharma. Like many Tibetan

religious biographies, the tale begins several generations before Gesar's earthly birth, describing the karmic seeds that led to the eventual birth of these religion-destroying demons, as well as Gesar's previous incarnations and the conditions that brought about his descent to earth. The poem goes on to describe the story of his difficult childhood at the hands of an evil King Regent, his capture of the throne of Ling and marriage to the lady Sengjam Drukmo as a prize for winning a horse race, his conquests of numerous kingdoms, Lady Sengjam Drukmo's kidnapping by the evil king of Hor, the great Hor Ling battle and numerous smaller battles for land, honor, dharma and wealth⁶⁶.

While different regions tell the poem differently, and consider different stories canon, all tell the story of the horse race, the battles against the demons, and the Hor-Ling battle. The most famous versions of the poem are found in Mongolia, Ladakh and Tibet⁶⁷, with the eastern Tibetan versions being the most extensive (David-Neel, 3).

In this paper, I will concentrate on the overall implications of the Gesar traditions in Tibet by looking specifically at three traditions. These are the traditions of reading the epic, bardic recitation, and the tantric dance practices also known as the *Lingdro Dechen Rolmo*, or *Lingdro*.

⁶⁶ For an excellent summary of the major stories in the Epic of King Gesar, see "The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling" by Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden.

⁶⁷ For information on the Ladakhi and Mongolian versions, see A.H. Francke's "A Lower Ladakhi Version of the Gesar Saga" and Zara Wallace's "Gesar!: The Epic Tale of Tibet's Great Warrior-King."

Religious Significance of Gesar

Although some take Gesar as a story, many more see the entire epic as a teacher in the Dzogchen lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Gesar is proclaimed in the epic itself to be a student of Guru Rinpoche, specifically a rebirth of the Bodhisttva Thöpa Gawa who is personally requested by Guru Rinpoche to go down to earth. All of the major characters of the epic are also manifestations or emanations of major Buddhist deities or Bodhisattvas. For example, Sengjam Drugmo is a manifestation of Tara, Trothung as an emanation of Hayagriva/Red Tamdrin, and so forth.

In Mongolia the epic loses much of its Buddhist significance and, instead, Gesar is portrayed as a great shaman, however the details of the story, its plotlines and morals remain the same (Sarangerel, 2001, 193-199). Likewise in parts of the Muslim region of Gilgit Baltistan, the epic often takes on a more Muslim tilt while retaining all of its original structure.

In Tibetan Buddhist areas, the original Buddhist significance has moved on into several full Buddhist practices. These include a Gesar “Guru Yoga” practice, involving tantric visualization and meditation⁶⁸. Since a competition of 100,000 guru yoga practices is one quarter of the foundational *ngondro* practices before one is allowed to do certain higher level tantric practices, this allows devotees of Gesar to make Gesar one of the major

⁶⁸ Mipham Rinpoche. */rig pa ‘gyur med ye shes kyi skyes bu chen po’I bla ma’I rnal ‘byor rlabs myur ‘jug ces by aba bzhugs so// “A Method for Quickly Entering the Stream of Blessings of the Guru Yoga of Gesar, who is the Unchanging Wisdom of Awareness.”* Trans. Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal and Carl Stuenkel. Boulder, CO: Dharma Samudra, 1994. Print.

foundations of their Buddhist practice. The Lingdro, which will be discussed in detail later, is a major tantric practice of Gesar.

There are also more minor practices of Gesar, such as Gesar divination. This popular, and simple, form of fortune telling can be performed by anyone. The practitioner attempts to create a pure state of mind, then opens a book of the epic to a random page. Depending on which character from the epic is singing on that page indicates whether or not their fortune will be good.

The tale of Gesar also has distinct messianic implications (David-Neel, 31). The end of the epic, as it is told in Yushu, ends with a promise that Gesar, Drukmo, their armies and attendants are leaving this life to prepare for the greater quest ahead of them. Belief in his return ranges from a more metaphoric return of a “Gesar mindset” or Gesar’s omnipresence to a far more literal understanding. In the early 20th Century, Alexandra David-Neel reported visiting a monastery in Beijing with a wealthy Tibetan woman who prayed that she might have ““a son, and that he may have strength and courage wherewith to serve the King [Gesar] in the great war””(David-Neel, 30). This woman believed, with the same fervor that many evangelical Christians believe in the imminent return of Jesus that they themselves shall witness, that Gesar would return and her son could hold a physical post in his army.



Figure 8: Tibetan armor, allegedly from Damo, a general in Gesar's army. For believers in gesar, such artifacts stand as physical proof of his existence and deeds. Photo: Namgyal Dhondrup. From the private collection of Namgyal Dhondup

The Bardic Tradition

The written style of the Gesar epic or *drung* is a combination of prose and verse. The sections written in verse are usually longer speeches made by important characters, while descriptions and shorter statements are written in prose. The sections of prose are recited while the poetic sections are sung. Certain melodies are reserved for certain characters,

or for men or women, and melodies change according to the region in which the bard learned the epic⁶⁹.

Prior to the 1950s, travelling bards were very popular in Tibet, as in much of the world several centuries earlier. Two of the most popular forms were *lama mani* and the gesar bards. Lama Mani travelled with religious paintings, singing the stories of the paintings for a largely illiterate audience⁷⁰. Gesar bards would sing the epic in much the same manner.

Historically in Tibet the literacy rate has been very low. School was limited to a monastic education, which may or may not have reached nuns, and education for those few elite able to attend school or afford a tutor. To compound this problem, Tibet has not historically had a great volume of fictional literature or children's books. Most literature was dharma, science, law, poetry or astrology (Thomas, 216, 1950)⁷¹. Gesar fell into the unique category of popular reading.

In recent years, education and Tibetan literacy have become more accessible for children in Tibet. However, it is still common for a family to only have one or two literate members, most often children. For many families, Gesar is one of the few sources of pleasurable reading. A child who learned how to read would be expected to read the

⁶⁹ Denma Khyentse. Personal Interview. Jan 6th, 2015.

⁷⁰ Harrer, Heinrich. *Lost Lhasa: Heinrich Harrer's Tibet*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992. Print. (134)

⁷¹ Thomas, Lowell. *Out of This World; across the Himalayas to Forbidden Tibet*. New York: Greystone, 1950. Print.

Gesar books aloud. The child's interest in the story would most likely have already been piqued from hearing recitations and stories at home (Yangzom, et al. 2012) During these recitations, villagers would gather in their house to listen to the child reading the story of Gesar.

Frequently, the elder participants would become emotional, crying during the tragic scenes (Monlam, 2012)⁷². Despite the illiteracy of the parents, children's literacy is being strongly rewarded in modern Tibet by the community's desire to hold on to the Epic of Gesar.

Others described learning Gesar stories from their older siblings while out on the mountains. For nomadic families and stationary families that practiced animal husbandry⁷³, younger boys are responsible for taking the animals up to the mountains for fresh grazing. With no other form of entertainment, the boys play simple games or tell Gesar stories.

However, while such discussion is widely encouraged in eastern Tibet, Western Tibetans perceived a greater risk. Many feared that if Gesar stories were told incompletely or with improper respect, Gesar might curse you. Thus parents discouraged their children from participation (Tsering, 2012)⁷⁴. Even among eastern Tibetans, there remains a concern

⁷² Monlam, Karma. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

⁷³ Tibetans split themselves into "drokpa" and "shingpa", usually translated as farmers and nomads, however shingpa does not include animal husbandry, as western farming might.

⁷⁴ Tsering, Pasang. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

that youths may imitate his warlike nature (Orgyen, 2013). However, for most, he remains a role model of bravery and justice (Phuntsok, 2012)⁷⁵.

Gesar has not been popular everywhere. Within the famed Nechung monastery, recitation of the Gesar epic is forbidden. Two main reasons are cited for this ban. The religious reason states that the deity of the Nechung Oracle, Pehar, was one of the profane deities that was tamed and forced to take a vow to protect Dharma by Guru Rinpoche. He allegedly still holds a grudge. A much more secular view of the ban is that the Gesar epic was so popular, much like a Tibetan “Harry Potter” that monks were wasting their time reading Gesar instead of working on their studies⁷⁶.

Aside from reading, the bardic tradition is also carried out through memorization. According to most Tibetans, between 100 and 400 people worldwide have memorized the entire epic and can recite it. Such memorization is considered a spiritual miracle and a blessing, but should not be mistaken for trance recitation, which will be covered in depth later.

The bardic tradition has also birthed several modern permutations. Gesar plays and even short movies are immensely popular, especially in the eastern region of Golok, spanning parts of Kham and Amdo. Such movies have featured famous pop and traditional signers like Riga and Dartso. Popular gesar music performances have been featured in the Qinghai Amdo Tibetan new year show, published on the state run, Tibetan language

⁷⁵ Phuntsok, Gelek. Personal interview. Dec. 2012

⁷⁶ Dabhe, Personal Interviews. March-April 2012.

QHTV station, as well as the major concert of the “First Bend at the Yellow River”.

State run Lhasa television (XZTV) also broadcasts daily a gesar bard’s recitations.

State support for Gesar spreads far and wide. China petitioned UNESCO for Gesar to be recognized as an intangible cultural heritage, and the recognition was accepted⁷⁷. This included recognizing Golok Maling as the birthplace of Gesar, a move widely celebrated by Tibetans for recognizing Gesar’s significance in Tibetan history, and simultaneously criticized by a large number of Tibetans who feel that Gesar was born in Dege Lingzang instead. Despite the opposing views on his birthplace, Khampa Tibetans, including those from Dege, eagerly supported the official recognition and cultural protection provided. Famous singers, including Kunga Phuntsog from Dege Ashu, performed at the official recognition ceremony⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ "Intangible Cultural Heritage-Gesar Epic Tradition." UNESCO Culture Sector. UNESCO, n.d. Web. <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/?RL=00204>>.

⁷⁸ Phuntsok, Kunga. "Phayul Drenlu-Kunga. Tibetan Song." Concert for the Recognition of Maling as the Birthplace of Gesar. QHTV. Maling, Golok, Qinghai, n.d. YouTube. Web. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45KkV4C75ck>>.

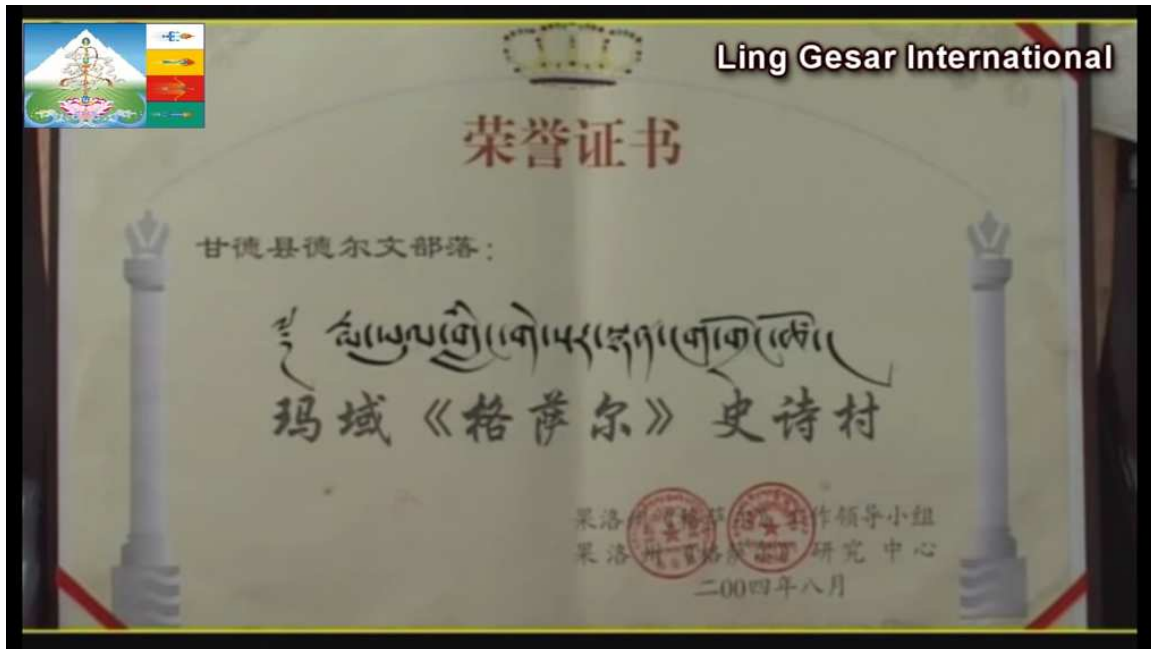


Figure 9: Official state recognition of Maling as the birthplace of Gesar. Courtesy of Ling Gesar International. The document is in both Chinese and Tibetan and features a seal of government approval on the lower right, and the seal of the Ling Gesar International Association on the upper left.

Maling also maintains an officially sanctioned tradition of recognizing rebirths and emanations of the Gesar epic. At a time where China's involvement in the recognition of Tibetan reincarnations is under fire, the recognitions in Maling have generally received official support as well as great communal support from Tibetans. The late Kyabje Khenchen Jigme Phuntsok even built a model of the Sengdruk Taktse (*seng 'brug stag rtse*), or Gesar's Palace, in Golok, on what he believed to be the site of the original Sengdruk Taktse.



Figure 10: Statue of Sengjam Drukmo at the Sengdruk Taktse, Golok. Photo Orgyen Kyab

Such communal, governmental, media, literacy and family incentives do not exist in exile. There, the Gesar tradition is in decline. However, many Tibetans feel that the tradition is growing rapidly in the post-Cultural-Revolution years in Tibet.

Babdrung and Spontaneous Trance Practice

The growth in Gesar recitation traditions Tibetans largely attribute to the rise in incidences of spontaneous Gesar trance. Although cases differ, one common theme is falling asleep in the mountains. Like Mongolia, Tibetan mountains are believed to have a

spiritual soul, identical to the *savdag* of Mongolia⁷⁹. A person would go up into the mountains for herding, fall asleep and wake up able to recite the epic of Gesar (Tsewang, 2012⁸⁰; Dakpa, 2012⁸¹). In a recent case in Jyekundo, a man named Dawa Drakpa fell asleep in a mountain known for being the residence of both good and evil spirits. As he slept, he dreamed of an elderly monk. The monk offered him a gift, asking if the sleeping man wanted to be able to speak to animals or have a knowledge of all things. When Dawa awoke, he was rambling incomprehensibly and his family cared for him as if he had gone mad. After a few weeks, his speech started to regain coherency, and people realized that his odd ramblings were all in the cadence and archaic language of Gesar poetry.

Since that time, Drungpa Dadrak⁸², as he is now known, has become a renowned source of knowledge for the community. When asked a question, he closes his eyes to meditate and after a few moments begins to twitch in a manner similar to the Nechung Kuten⁸³. He would then start singing in the rhythm and language of the Gesar poem, answering the query of the questioner (Tsewang, 2012).

Others can solely recite the epic, and although they learned it in trance or a dream, recite it in a fully conscious state. However, considering the length of the poem, its archaic language, and the illiteracy of the reciters, this is considered miraculous among Tibetans.

⁷⁹ *Savdag* is a Mongolian cognate of the Tibetan word “*sab dag*”

⁸⁰ Nyima, Tsewang. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

⁸¹ Dakpa. Personal interview. Dec. 2012

⁸² “Dawa Drakpa of the Epic”

⁸³ The medium of the Nechung oracle, government advisor for Tibet.

Some are believed to be the incarnations of characters from the Gesar poem, and when they fall into trance believe that they are once again living the epic. A case in Jyekundo⁸⁴, from the early 1900s speaks of a man believed to be the incarnation of Gesar's General, Dikchen Shenpa. When reciting the portion on the Hor-Ling battle, widely considered the most emotional section of the poem, he would grab a sword and chase after a young boy, believed to be the incarnation of the king of Hor (David-Neel, 40).

These cases are widespread in Eastern Tibet and have started occurring at an unprecedented rate since the early 1980s (Ringu, 2012)⁸⁵, yet they are unheard of in exile. None of those I interviewed had ever heard of a case of spontaneous trance occurring outside of the Tibetan Plateau or Mongolia. The seeming explosion of spontaneous Gesar transmission, following the relaxation of restrictions after the Cultural Revolution, seems to believers evidence that Gesar is personally⁸⁶ trying to revive Tibetan culture through bringing his spirit to his people. For Tibetans, by causing these trances, he forces an involuntary involvement in the revival of Tibetan traditional culture in twenty-first century Tibet.

⁸⁴ Ch. Jiegu, Yushu prefecture, Qinghai province. Also written Kyikudo, Kyekudo, and Jakyendo.

⁸⁵ Ringu Tulku. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

⁸⁶ The idea of Gesar's personal intercession is far from uncommon. When I began the research for this paper and was struggling to find funding to travel, numerous Tibetans told me that, since Gesar was a protector and I was honoring Gesar, Gesar would find a way for me to get the money. During my research, many Tibetans attributed my bouts of good luck to Gesar, saying "Gesar came to Seattle!"

Lingdro Dechen Rolmo: The Sacred Tantric Dances of Gesar

Another Gesar tradition experiencing major expansion is that of the Lingdro. The

Lingdro itself is a somewhat modern tradition. The tertön⁸⁷ of the tradition, Ju Mipham Rinpoche (1846-1912) is a relatively modern master of Buddhism. Uniquely, although Mipham Rinpoche was a follower of the Nyingma school of Buddhism, and while this was long before the Rime⁸⁸ movement started to gain a major hold, the Lingdro tradition spans several schools of Buddhism.

The initial revival of Lingdro occurred in 1945 (Drolma, 155, 2012)⁸⁹. Ratreng Rinpoche⁹⁰, best known as the political regent for the current Dalai Lama, revived the practice through a combination of visions and arranging transmissions from the few remaining dancers to be given to a descendent of the Mukpo Dong lineage, Norsang (Drolma and Vajra, 2012)⁹¹.

In 1959, Norsang came to India and settled in Orissa, Camp 3. Only a few months later the Dalai Lama was scheduled to visit. Norsang gathered eighty people and taught them

⁸⁷ One who finds termas.

⁸⁸ “Non-Sectarianism”. A movement founded by the Sakya scholar, Jamyang Khyentse Choekyi Lodro, believes in the validity and exchange of teachings from all four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug.)

⁸⁹ Drolma, Tseyang. *Gling Rje Ge Sar nor Bu Dgra ‘dul Rtsal Gyi Rtogs Brjod Las/ Gling Bro Bde Chen Rol Mo Zhes Pa’i Cho Kha’i ‘byung Khungs Dang Brgyud ‘dzin Bcas Dar ‘phel Lo Rgyus Mdor Bsdus Dkar Phyogs G.yul Las Rgyal Ba’i Ki Bswa Zhas by Aba Bzhugs So//* (“A Brief History of the Origin, Lineage of Dancers and Diffusion of the Gling Bro Bde Chen Rol Mo Performance” Tibetan Language). Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute, 2012. Print.

⁹⁰ More commonly spelled “Reting Rinpoche” the actual spelling is rwa sgrenge, and therefore I have chosen to spell it Ratreng.

⁹¹ Drolma, Tseyang, and Vajra Bodhi. Personal interview. Dec.-Jan. 2012-2013

the Lingdro Dechen Rolmo⁹². They then made, from what little they had, all of the costumes and ritual implements to be worn by the dancers, who must visualize themselves as deities and the stage as a Buddha field (Orgyen, 2013). When the Dalai Lama visited Orissa, the Lingdro Dechen Rolmo was performed for the public (Drolma and Vajra, 2012).

This performance caused a significant shift in both the practice and popularity of Gesar. The Lingdro is a highest yoga tantra, considered by Buddhists to be the most difficult and potentially dangerous type of practice, yet with the highest potential benefit. Practices of highest yoga tantra can lead to enlightenment within a single lifetime. It was also a deeply secret practice, but after the public performances, the Dalai Lama encouraged Norsang to teach and perform the Lingdro widely, still as tantra, but no longer in secret. Since that time, Norsang has initiated hundreds, if not thousands, of dancers, and the lineage holder roll has been passed on to his grand-niece, Tseyang Drolma (Drolma and Vajra, 2012). The revival of the Lingdro is, arguably, less organic than other revivals discussed in this paper. The practice of the Lingdro had been highly secretive until the Dalai Lama chose to encourage it and requested the lineage holders to actively propagate it. On the other hand, Tseyang Drolma, the current main lineage holder, only teaches where she is request, and so there must be some effort of the revival coming from the requesting communities as well.

⁹² Title of this specific set of 13 dances.

The Lingdro is one of few Gesar traditions which has stretched widely beyond the Himalayas. In April 2015, 16 Lingdro dancers from New York City, under the instruction of Gen⁹³ Wangdak Tagtser, a cousin of Tseyang Drolma, performed for the Karmapa during his visit to the United states. The Lingdro Tsokpa of New York consists primarily of Tibetans, almost entirely born in exile, but also includes a few non-Tibetans including Americans and Chinese who have adopted the Gesar practices. The Lingdro Tsokpa also promotes Gesar from an education perspective in the United States, often giving lectures, interactive work shops and presentations at the Rubin Museum of Art, in Chelsea, NY⁹⁴.



Figure 11: The male half of New York Gesar Tsokpa practicing for a performance. Lingdro teacher, Gen Wangdak Takser, on the front right, leads the group. Practices are held in Elmhurst, Queens, where a large percentage of Tibetan immigrants live, in the back parking lot of a Tibetan home. Here, the young men practice in western clothing, their general daily wear, as most are coming straight from school or jobs. Photo Amalia Rubin

⁹³ Gen is a title meaning “teacher”.

⁹⁴ "The Epic of King Gesar-Himalayan Heritage Meet-Up | Rubin Museum of Art." The Epic of King Gesar. The Rubin Museum of Art, n.d. Web. <<http://rubinmuseum.org/events/event/himalayan-heritage-meet-up-3-4-15>>.

In 2012, forty students from the Tibetan Transit School in Dharamsala received direct transmission from Tseyang Drolma. Over a period of two months intensive study, they learned to perform the Lingdro and danced at the Kagyu Monlam⁹⁵ in Bodh Gaya (Tibetan Transit School Lingdro Group⁹⁶, 2012)⁹⁷. For many students, it was an honor to perform for the Karmapa, nothing more. However, for most it was a sacred chance to connect with Gesar. They believe Gesar is important for Tibetans, as a sign of hope. Gesar's promised return is to rescue the righteous during dark times (Yangzom, et al. 2012). Several young people believe that his return is imminent; in fact he may already have been born on earth (TTS, 2012).

⁹⁵ The "Great Prayer Festival" of the Kagyu school

⁹⁶ Henceforth referred to as TTS

⁹⁷ Tibetan Transit School Lingdro Group. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.



Figure 12: Female TTS Lingdro Students in Bodh Gaya on the stage after their Lingdro Performance. Here, the dancers are wearing traditional dresses as well as elaborate hair pieces. Although these hair styles are still well preserved in Tibet, most exile Tibetans do not know how to create them and have never even worn them. However, these women as part of the dance practice, must wear these traditional styles and meditate on them as if they were truly their clothing and natural hair. Photo Amalia Rubin

For Tseyang Dolma, and other Gesar devotees, these dark times⁹⁸ are upon us (Drolma and Vajra, 2013; Yangzom, et al., 2012). While many await Gesar's physical return as a

⁹⁸ The kaliyuga, or degenerate era, when Buddhism will be in decline and sin will become prevalent.

great leader (Tenzin, 2012)⁹⁹, some more traditionally, as an army general (David-Neel, 30-32), others believe that Gesar is always present (Drolma and Vajra, 2012). His particular significance today is to rescue the dharma from degeneration. In a time of scandals and decline in monastic population, Gesar's practice seems especially important to his devotees. Unlike most Dharma figures, Gesar was never a monk. He was a king, a married man, and a householder. For Buddhist practitioners, the Lingdro represents a chance for lay people to connect with their Buddha nature. The varying Gesar practices are primarily aimed at lay people. They provide a path for people of all walks of life, in the most difficult of circumstances, to enter the stream of enlightenment, as did the subjects of legendary Ling.

Gesar and Identity in the 21st Century

The numerous practices of Gesar are uniquely fitted to the situation in which most young Tibetans find themselves. Unlike in the past, strict religious regulations in China prevent young people from legally taking monastic vows. Devout young Tibetans are thus given the choice of breaking the law or to become lay practitioners. Likewise, as more educational options open to young Tibetans, more choose to pursue a higher education while devoting themselves to lay practice.

From a textual perspective, the end of the Gesar epic indicates that Gesar and his generals will return in a messianic role to bring the Dharma to the world and destroy evildoers.

For young Tibetans, the idea of a heroic rescuer who embodies the glory of Tibetan faith and culture, is an inspiration. To live up to the ideals of Gesar is to live up to the Tibetan

⁹⁹ Choekyi, Tenzin. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

ideals of a perfect layperson (Dorjee, 2011). His way of life and practices provide an alternative to the now-difficult monastic route.

The Lingdro, for example, is like a *cham* dance, the sacred tantric masked dances of the Tibetan monasteries, but it is nearly exclusively danced by non-monastics. While monastics have numerous opportunities for such tantric practices and time for study, the Lingdro is an option for the rest of Buddhists, who cannot necessarily devote their lives to Dharma exclusively (Drolma and Vajra, 2012). The practice is an accessible one to lay people and the story of Gesar is an easy one for lay people to understand and enjoy. Gesar himself was a layperson and a householder. His particular significance today, to rescue the dharma from degeneration, is one that many Tibetans share.

The fear of the degenerate era seems is not limited to Buddhists alone. Many fear modernity as the loss of culture and values, and Tibet is a locus for those fears. The struggles that Tibet currently faces make these fears all too reasonable. Sudden modernization, led by an outside power, and the influx of previously unknown cultural influences could be a threat to any culture. Yet the traditions of Gesar remain strong, and his flourishing practice continues to influence and direct the lives of Tibet's next generation.

Chapter 3: Discussion

In an era of globalization when Tibetan youths model their hairstyles on Korean pop stars and young Mongolians have trouble typing in their own alphabet and would rather type in English, why are so many of these same young generations taking a vested interest in indigenous practices? Why are so many young people suddenly caught up in the consciously involuntary practices of spirit possession and trance, which even practitioners often view as embarrassing and old-fashioned? In both the cases of Gesar and Böö Mörgöl, the practices and values stand in opposition to the struggle that both regions are currently waging for an industrial modernity. Why, then do such revivals hold importance in the lives of Tibetan and Mongolian people?

As of yet, not much research has been done on either subject. Although Gesar has been extensively researched for its textual history, little work has been conducted on 20th and 21st century cultural practices of Gesar. Böö Mörgöl has likewise only been studied through a limited lens. While the practices of the countryside, especially the far northern Darhad and Buryat regions, have been studied extensively, little work has been done in the capitol where roughly 50% of Mongolians now reside. Recognizing the dearth of research on these topics and my unique opportunities to live in and around both communities, I felt it was important that I take advantage of these chances. Furthermore, upon a brief consideration, I realized that the situations were comparable.

In Tibet and Mongolia, we have two regions which have, within recent living memory, experienced extraordinarily harsh repression: the Cultural Revolution and soviet period respectively. During both, folklore, language, customs, and family life were all attacked.

Both have, since liberalization, experienced a great revival, to the best we can tell, of indigenous religious and cultural practices.

The traditional revivals have a great deal in common, far more than just the period in which they occur. Both have a role in environmental protection due to their role in specific locations. Both represent the inherent power of the land and indigenous spirits. Both represent periods of great, imperial glory whether through the conquest of Chingis Khaan or King Gesar. Both also play a major role in nationalism.

Both cases pose a potential threat to government stability, as Böö Mörgöl has a history of being a threat to the standing government and Gesar has a potential messianic interpretation. Interestingly, however, Gesar is overtly encouraged and embraced by the Chinese government, while Böö Mörgöl seems to be feared by government parties that wish to control it.

There are also many differences between the situations surrounding both of these revivals. Mongolia is the target of extensive missionizing. Although the same could be said of Tibet, missionizing is illegal in China, severely limiting the capacities of missionaries to create congregations, churches, and communities. The missionizing in Mongolia includes internal missionizing of Buddhism, for example, as well as extensive missionary work taken by foreigners excited to enter a newly opened country largely bereft of religion.

In Tibet, Gesar is widely accepted and encouraged, not only by locals and practitioners, but by several levels of the local and national government. Böö Mörgöl, on the other hand, is discouraged by both a significant portion of the local population and the government itself. While Gesar practices are both voluntary and involuntary, with the vast majority of active practitioners practicing a voluntary form, Böö Mörgöl is almost entirely involuntary. Gesar can have a great deal of direct involvement by non-leading members, but this is far less possible in Böö Mörgöl

Views of Böö Mörgöl are also deeply divided among Mongolian youth. Many of the so-called “modern” religious youth, who are Buddhist or Christian, view Böö Mörgöl and black magic and sinful. Another group of so called “modern” true atheists view all religion as backwards and holding Mongolia back from development. However, many young people have embraced Böö Mörgöl, believing it to be the true religion of Mongolia. They see it as timeless and a way to decolonize the hearts and souls of Mongolia (Enkhbayar, 2014)¹⁰⁰. Finally, there are the “agnostics” who believe in Tenger but don’t frequent shamans. They make up a significant proportion of Mongolian youth and don’t have much of an opinion regarding religion, yet instinctively follow the traditional Mongolian pantheon.

Benefits of Revival

There are many benefits to these revivals. In Mongolia, a country where decades of oppression and colonial rule have broke apart traditional families and structures, the

¹⁰⁰ Enkhbayar, Basansuren. Personal interview. June-July 2012.

shamans have played an immeasurable role in recreating what has been lost. With it has returned the role of the shaman as a storyteller, holder of histories and holder of genealogies. For many families, forced to burn their written genealogies to save themselves from the soviet purges, the shaman remains the only way to recreate a history, which now stops with the last living relative's furthest memories. The shaman could help recreate these genealogies through the ritual songs of address, which included birthplaces, ancestral names, the names of children and so forth (Buyandelger, 1.945). Although these may be imagined histories, the shaman's songs and oral transmission of the so-called genealogy serve to connect the Mongolian people to a history stolen by the Socialist era.

Likewise, shamans as holders of *yos* or customs are playing an active role in recreating *yos* in Mongolia. More than culture, *yos* is a near-sacred system of behavior based on Mongolian nomadic ethics and thus integral to Mongolian traditional identity. The shamanic ceremonies take place under the strict rules of *yos*. I remember being scolded for offering a *khadag* (offering scarf) of the wrong color, placing my hands an inch too near to my self when receiving a blessing, leaning on one arm when my leg fell asleep from kneeling, drinking too quickly, and addressing the spirit with the more common "sain baina uu" instead of the more classical and respectful "amar baina uu."

A young Mongolian man, the shaman's attendant, during one ceremony picked up a cup the shaman had thrown in trance, and which I was supposed to pick up. For this breach of *yos*, he was forced to kneel before the spirit and prostrate himself while the shaman

struck him severely three times across the back with a staff made of three bound birch branches.

Yet the shaman, as the holder of *yos*, is also above it. His or her activities, both within and outside of trance, may occasionally breach all standards of *yos* (Pederson, 90). For example, the shaman may joke about death and other topics of bad omens, or they may touch a person's head or shoulders. As the entity that holds *yos* they are seen as above it, while still being its strict enforcers.

And similar to Aitmatov's critique of the *mankurt* in Turkic society, the shaman scolds those who have failed to internalize Mongolian customs. After a series of meetings with one Khalkh grandmother spirit, I announced I would be leaving Mongolia but planned to return. This spirit had advised me to study Mongolian customs well and learn them thoroughly, as I am technically considered a member of the Oirad Western Mongolian tribe. Through my translator, I asked her forgiveness for being unable to speak decent Mongolian and being unfamiliar with Mongolian custom, thus likely committing several faux pas.

The grandmother spirit, through the shaman, laughed bitterly and said: "What does it matter? You are doing fine! None of these young Mongols know *yos* anyway. They should be ashamed! Even they don't know their own customs. At least *you* are trying to learn!" My translator, a thirty-one year old Mongolian man, lowered his head in

embarrassment, and stepped out of his role as translator to apologize to the grandmother spirit for forgetting the *yos*, and what it means to be Mongolian.

Every country that was touched by the Soviet empire was thrown into a period of forced forgetting. Central Asia and Mongolia, regions that relied upon the oral traditions of their nomadic heritage, were thrust into a political and cultural world completely unlike anything that their culture had prepared them for. The Shamans of Mongolia have fought to reestablish the lost lineages and return the Mongolian people to their ways.

For Tibetans as well, the revival of Gesar practices have made an invaluable contribution to the preservation and promotion of Tibetan culture. Not only does Gesar's tale teach traditional values, the belief in his imminent return makes learning those values and living them all the more important, especially if one wants to join Gesar's army.

Gesar's presence is considered very tangible. One can be a direct descendant of Gesar's Mukpo Dong tribe or the lineage of any of his numerous generals. Tibetans can visit the locations of the Gesar epic, such as the post where Gesar tied his horse, the location of Gesar's palace and so forth. By visiting these places, they can directly receive a blessing from Gesar. When parents bring children or horse rider's bring their horses, to these sacred places, they do so saying "may you grow up to be like" whomever that place is representative of (Dorjee, 2011)¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ Dorjee, Trisong. Personal interview. Feb. 2011

Not only does Gesar provide a source of encouragement for young people to be literate in Tibetan, and not only does the Gesar religious practice provide a direct route to enlightenment for lay people in a place and time where monasticism is especially difficult, but Gesar is believed to be able to directly intercede. During the course of my research, for example, when I received a surprise source of funding, my Tibetan friends all exclaimed that Gesar was watching out for me and Gesar had helped me. During times of struggle, likewise, they will encourage each other to pray to Gesar and have faith in Gesar. Boons are the grace of Gesar and Guru Rinpoche and challenges are an opportunity to pray.

Pride in Gesar does not seem to be waning either. Only a few months prior to this writing, famed singer Riga who had produced several songs about Gesar demonizing the Kingdom of Hor went to visit Nagchu, which is believed to be the original Kingdom of Hor. During the concert, concert goers felt like he had insulted their history with Gesar and began throwing bottles and glasses, forcing Riga off the stage.



Figure 13: Screen shot of Riga forced off stage as the audience throws bottles. This act of violence took place under the religious image (upper left) which adorns the night club. Riga was considered completely at fault, by virtue of having sung lyrics considered to dishonor the town's history with Gesar. He was forced to later make a public televised apology.¹⁰²

In numerous cities, the central square features a statue of Gesar or Drukmo. Different locations across Tibet take credit with great pride Gesar or Drukmo being born in their land. Young Tibetan children will play Gesar in the same way that American kids might play Spiderman. He is a source of heroism and pride, his alleged power through his babdrung validate his story as real and validate Buddhism and Tibetan culture as having inherent, divine powers.

¹⁰² This video was shared widely on the Social Media platform "Wechat", but was not posted on any video sharing sites.



Figure 14: Statue of Ling Gesar in the central square of Jyekundo, Yushu. Two years after this photo was taken, a massive earthquake destroyed 90% of the buildings in Jyekundo. The Gesar statue, however, stood unmoved. For local people, this incident provided proof of Gesar's miraculous powers. Photo Amalia Rubin

Identity and Indigenous Practice

It is clear that, for practitioners of Gesar and Böö Mörgöl, the role that these practices play in their lives is extremely important to their idea of self and identity. They also play a role in forming the connection between the past, when maintaining culture was easy, and the present where numerous outer influences make it difficult especially for youth to connect to a culture which may seem outdated. In the face of development, these challenges are especially important in order to work with such communities.

One challenge that affects international researchers and development workers frequently is the question of why ideas that seem to work in theory fail dismally on the ground. I

personally have encountered two examples of nearly identical cases, both of which seemed ideal yet failed. One case involved solar powered stoves in northeastern Tibet, the other involved new Turkish wood stoves for nomads in Mongolia, I shall concentrate on the latter. A major health concern in central and inner asia is the use of wood and dung burning stoves in the home. These stoves use a lot of fuel and release a great deal of smoke. Not only does this force family member to spend a lot of time collecting fuel, but the smoke in the house leads to increased cases of cataracts, and lung, throat, and eye illness. This is especially prevalent among Ger District communities that may choose to burn plastic and tires in their stoves due to a lack of alternate fuel, thus releasing toxic fumes into the air. The new stoves were seen as a potential efficient and clean solution to these problems. However, in both cases communities refused to use them.

Foreign planners and workers were baffled: why would these people refuse to use a more efficient, healthier solution? In nomadic communities across central and Inner Asia, Tibetan and Mongolian included, the stove is a sacred entity and home to a protective deity. One does not point one's feet towards the stove or the fire or hang clothing (especially socks) above it. The fire deity is "fed" when fuel is put into its "mouth." By attempting to replace the standard, old iron stoves with a new style of stove, developers were unwittingly attempting to remove a god from the kitchen. Regardless of how efficient an idea or project may seem, it will not be efficient if it is not used. People will not undo thousands of years of cultural values for the sake of a perceived benefit.

Yet another example involves tourists. In both Mongolia and Tibet, tourism is a major form of income and many new companies specialize in Mongolian or Tibetan run, environmentally sustainable tourism companies as a form of social entrepreneurship¹⁰³. Prior to such locally run tourist groups, in Tibet for example, Chinese tourists would commonly arrive on Chinese organized tours and deeply offend the Tibetan hosts with no admonishment from tour organizers. In one case, the tourists hung their wet socks over the family fire (Karko, 143)¹⁰⁴. In another, they surrounded a Tibetan breastfeeding mother, pointing and laughing until the woman was reduced to tears. I have often seen western tourists in Tibetan communities justify their actions by claiming that the customer is always right, but this is not so: people will not undue their culture for the sake of pleasing outsiders. Such offenses have resulted in shops and restaurants where foreigners are not allowed and certain areas where volunteers are rejected on sight.

Had the researchers and workers been more familiar with the indigenous values of Tibet and Mongolia, the stove failure might have been avoided. If we, as developers and researchers, do not understand people's values, we are forcing them to conform to our values. As previously established, when a people are stripped of their identity through oppression, after they have more freedom, they still tend to have high rates of alcoholism and suicide. Joe Brings Plenty of the Mnicoujou Oglala Lakota tribe and chairman of the Cheyenne River Sioux related a similar experience among his people. He did not know that his family was considered poor or in poverty until social workers told him that. It was a shaking experience for the family who were being told that the things they felt

¹⁰³ Such as Tseren Tours in Mongolia or Snow Lion Tours in Qinghai.

¹⁰⁴ Karko, Kate. *Namma*. London, UK: Sceptre, 2001. Print.

were of value were not considered valuable by the surrounding society. As the Oglala Lakota have become targets of what are popularly referred to as “poverty porn” campaigns and documentaries, more and more young Lakota feel as though they have nothing of value. When I spoke to Brings Plenty in February of 2015, four Lakota youths had killed themselves in their community in the two weeks prior (Brings Plenty, 2015).

As a community leader and activist, he has been working with young Lakota to re-teach them the ceremonies, which, according to Brings Plenty have been lost to the point that only three or four families live in an “Indian way.” Not only does Brings Plenty teach the ceremonies, but he emphasizes the ownership that Lakota youth have over their own identity. The group of youth who have been learning about ownership of ceremony and identity have had, according to Brings Plenty, far lower rates of alcoholism and suicide than their peers.

Conclusion

When we consider the potential implications of rejecting people’s own ideas of value by rejecting their identity, we should not be surprised when such projects based on the foreign ideas of identity fail. Furthermore, postcolonial societies are more justified in being xenophobic and rejecting any foreign seeming projects. It is worth remembering that the entire, now discredited concept of White Man’s Burden, which once spanned most of the global south, was seen in its day as a form of international development. When we recognize this, we are forced to ask if our current forms of international research and development are no more than another White Man’s Burden. We must step

back and ask how people view their own identity in order to truly understand and respect it.

Both Tibet and Mongolia experienced a period of cultural purging. During these times, many of the most basic aspects of culture, whether singing love songs or referring to people by their family titles, were criminalized. In a relatively short period of time, many aspects of culture were destroyed and with them the threads connecting the new generation with the past. The practices of Gesar and Böö Mörgöl have provided a way to form or reform a Tibetan and Mongolian identity.

For both Tibetans and Mongolians, these practices can play a significant role in recovering the identity stolen from them by the forced-forgetting of the Socialist period and Cultural Revolution respectively. Through the words of practitioners in trance, the young generation can rebuild bridges to the past by either remembering or re-imagining history. The impressive powers, against the conscious will of the practitioner, stands in the eyes of believers as evidence of the truth of their culture, justification of their identity, and proof of the innate divine strength of their people. Finally, through these connections and justifications, a young Mongolian man can know his lineage, despite being one of the men “without fathers,” young Tibetans can trace their lineage to the generals of a sacred king, and young believers can anchor their modernity in the foundation of the past.

Glossary of Foreign Terms

(T)-Tibetan, (M)-Mongolia (TU)-Turkic dialect (S)-Sanskrit

Amdo	(T) <i>a mdo</i> , the north eastern area of Tibet. One of the three traditional provinces.
Agsan	(M) A wild, violent behavior. Usually the result of drunkenness, believed to be imparted by spirits.
Aman huur	(M) a Jew's harp.
Babdrung	(T) <i>'bab sgrung</i> A gesar epic reciter who recites, performs, or acts in a trance allegedly under the influence of the spirits.
Bagsh	(M) Teacher
Bariach	(M) Bonesetter, a traditional masseur and energy worker.
Bogd Khaan	(M) The Buddhist king of Mongolia.
Böö Mörgöl	(M) The indigenous religion of Mongolia. Commonly referred to as "Mongolian Shamanism."
Buryat	(M) One of the Mongolian ethnic groups, concentrated in Buryatia, Russia; Dornod, Mongolia; and China
Chanar	(M) A shaman's initiation.
Choijin	(M) Mongolian Buddhist spirit medium. A cognate of the Tibetan <i>choekyong</i> .
Choekyong	(T) <i>chos skyong</i> Tibetan Buddhist Dharma protector
Darhad	(M) One of the Mongolian ethnic groups, concentrated in the northern Khuvsgul region
Dukha	(TU) One of the Mongolian ethnic groups, concentrated in the far northern Taiga section of Khuvsgul province. Commonly known as "Tsataan" or "reindeer people," they consider the term

	“Tsataan” derogatory. “Dukha” is from their Tuvan language.
Dharma	(S) The teachings of Buddhism
Drung	(T) <i>sgrung</i> A story or epic
Durvud	(M) One of the ethnic groups of Mongolia.
Dzogchen	(T) <i>dzogs chen</i> One of the primary teachings of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.
Gelug	(T) <i>dge lugs</i> . The newest of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism
Ger	(M) The traditional Mongolian circular tent. Commonly known by the Russian name “Yurt.”
Ger District	(M) The areas on the outskirts of Mongolian cities where many migrants settle by setting up their gers on a free plot of land.
Gesar	(T) <i>ge sar</i> . The legendary king of the Epic of Gesar of Ling.
Golok	(T) <i>mgo log</i> A major region of Amdo
Guru Rinpoche	(T) <i>gu ru rin po che</i> The Tibetan name of Padmasambhava, the saint who brought Buddhism to Tibet
Hasha	(M) The plot of land making up a family’s yard.
Hayagriva	(S) One of the wrathful Buddhist deities. (Tibetan: Tamdrin <i>rta mgrin</i>)
Hor	(T) <i>hor</i> The enemy kingdom of Ling.
Höt	(M) “City”, often used in distinction from the ger district.
Hudu	(M) “Countryside”, often used in distinction from the ger district or höt.
Kazakh	(TU) One of the Mongolian ethnic groups, concentrated in the Bayan-Ölgii and Khovd provinces of Mongolia and Kazakhstan.
Khaan	(M) “King”
Khalkha	(M) The majority ethnic group of Mongolia.

Kham	(T) <i>kham</i> s, South-Eastern Tibet, one of the traditional three provinces
Khoroo	(M) District of a city.
Khotgod	(M) One of the ethnic groups of Mongolia
Khuvsgul	(M) One of Mongolia's far northern provinces.
Kuten	(T) <i>sku brtan</i> . Tibetan spirit medium.
Lama Mani	(T) <i>bla ma ma Ni</i> . A Tibetan sacred performance art form wherein the performer sings a Buddhist story while pointing to relevant pictures on a sacred painting.
Ling	(T) <i>gling</i> The legendary kingdom of Gesar.
Lingdro	(T) <i>gling bro</i> . The sacred tantric dances of Gesar of Ling.
Lingdro Dechen Rolmo	(T) <i>gling bro bde chen rol mo</i> . The complete 13 sacred songs and dances of the Lingdro.
Lujin	(M) The Mongolian word for the traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice of <i>chod</i> or "cutting," wherein the practitioner visualizes themselves cutting up their body and offering it to hungry spirits. A cognate of the Tibetan <i>luejin</i> (<i>lus sbyin</i>) meaning "offering the body."
Maling	(T) <i>rma gling</i> A city in Golok, officially recognized as the birthplace of Gesar.
Mankurt	(TU) "One who has forgotten his own mother", a term coined by the Kyrgyz author Chingis Aitmatov to refer to Turkic peoples who had forgotten their culture and heritage.
Naadam	(M) The Mongolian national sports competition
Ngondro	(T) <i>sngon 'gro</i> . The preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism
Nyingma	(T) <i>rnying ma</i> . The oldest of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism
Ongon	(M) A spirit. Pl. Ongod.

Otog	(M) A shaman's "family" or lineage.
Padmasambhava	(S) The saint who brought Buddhism to Tibet. (Tib. Guru Rinpoche)
Rime	(T) <i>ris med</i> . The ecumenical movement of Tibetan Buddhism.
Sahius	(M) A good luck charm, believed to be a place where a spirit can sit, protecting the wearer.
Savdag	(M) A spirit of the land, such as the soul of a mountain. Cognate of the Tibetan " <i>sabdag</i> "
Sakya	(T) <i>sa skya</i> . The second oldest of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism.
Sengjam Drukmo	(T) <i>seng lcam 'brug mo</i> . The wife of Gesar.
Shashin	(M) "Religion"
Shav	(M) "Disciple"
Taiga	(M) The far northern area of Khuvsgul. Essentially, southern Siberia.
Tara	(S) One of the main female Buddhas
Tenger	(M) The eternal sky and the omnipotent deity of the traditional Mongolian and Siberian pantheon.
Terma	(T) <i>gter ma</i> . A "found treasure" teaching, wherein the "treasure revealer" finds a hidden sacred teaching and it becomes part of the Buddhist canon.
Tolgoit	(M) One of the regions of the North Western ger district of Ulaanbaatar.
Trothung	(T) The mischievous uncle of Gesar.
Tsokpa	(T) <i>tsogs pa</i> . A group or organization.
Uheer	(M) An angry ghost, victim of a violent death.

Ulaach	(M) Spirit medium.
Ulaanbaatar	(M) The capital city of Mongolia. Commonly spelled “Ulan Bator”.
Yos	(M) The laws of Tenger which form the deep customs and lifestyle of Mongolia.
Yosgui	(M) “That which is not done” or what is not acceptable in accordance with yos. Literally “without yos.”
Zaarin	(M) A fully initiated male shaman. (Female: duurisah)
Zud	(M) an especially harsh winter, infamous for freezing livestock alive.

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