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# THE RESURGENCE OF DARHAD SHAMANISM

## LEGITIMISATION STRATEGIES OF RURAL PRACTITIONERS IN MONGOLIA

Judith Hangartner

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, shamanism resurged all over Siberia and Inner Asia. In Mongolia, shamans re-emerged on the northern peripheries, among the Buryats in the north-east (Buyandelgeriyn 2002, Shimamura 2004) as well as among the Darhad in north-western Mongolia. The Darhad and their shamanism were portrayed in-depth by the well-known Mongolian ethnographer Badamhatan (1965) at the height of socialism; however, there exists no comprehensive anthropological study of Darhad shamans in postsocialism. My doctoral thesis explores the characteristics of the practices of present-day Darhad shamans in a political context that allows shamans not only to perform their seances openly, but even welcomes their practices. One of the central subjects of my study thus became the relationships of Darhad shamans from the northern-most *taiga* borderlands with the urban centre.

For my fieldwork, I spent overall twelve months in the thinly populated *Shishget* or *Darhad* depression, which is the northern-most part of *Hövsgöl* province and borders the Russian republics of *Tuva* and *Buryatia*; in addition, I spent three months in the provincial centre of *Mörön* and the capital *Ulaanbaatar*<sup>1</sup>. In the course of these visits, I became acquainted with more than fifty shamanising people of the Darhad and of the small group of neighbouring Tuva/Tsaatan. This number includes a range of practitioners with different statuses, in the majority people known as shamans in their

neighbourhoods or even in the wider area, but also some apprentices and «secret shamans» who venerate shamanic ancestor spirits in private only. The majority of the present-day Darhad shamans are men who started shamanising several years after the political-economic transition, and the interest in becoming a shaman seemed only to increase during the period of my fieldwork between 2002 and 2004. Staying with shamans and their families, I attended their divinations and seances, participated in their interactions with neighbours and tourists, discussed with them the ontologies of spirits and shamanic genealogies, and accompanied them on their worldly travels to apprentices and clients.

### «Archaic tradition»

Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant scholarly perspective on shamanism has viewed it as an «archaic tradition» of pre-modern communities. Hamayon (1990), as one of the influential contemporary authors, distinguishes a genuine shamanism of hunting societies from a transformed shamanism of pastoral clans, and claims that in centralised state societies, only acculturated, marginalised, inferior shamanic elements remain. Opposing this framework, Thomas and Humphrey (1996) suggest examining shamans and their practices in the context of power relations and the state.

<sup>1</sup> Between spring 2002 and autumn 2004 I stayed four times in the *Darhad* depression and visited shamans living in the communes of *Renchinlühümbe*, *Tsagaan Nuur*, *Hatgal*, and in the northern part of *Ulaan Uul*. This field site covers an area roughly a third the size of Switzerland and is inhabited by around 10 000 people, who in the majority are mobile pastoralists.

The authors recommend shifting from an essentialist search for a timeless true shamanism to research on the diversity of inspirational practices, and situating these in relation to particular historical circumstances and transformations. Consequently, recent field studies in Inner Asia and Siberia highlight new phenomena, in particular the appearance of shamans in the midst of central cities offering their services in shamanic centres to an urban clientele<sup>2</sup>. These recent accounts place shamanic practices in the context of post-socialist identity construction and nationalism, as they reassess and celebrate the presocialist past. The scholarly focus on new features and inventions of shamanism is accompanied by an implicit tendency to question the «authenticity» of urban shamans: Usually through a brief remark, the new practices are demarcated from «traditional» shamanism, either situated in the past or in rural communities on the margins of the state. The insights gained during my fieldwork among exactly such rural shamans question the dichotomous opposition between a «traditional» shamanism surviving on the margins of socialist modernisation and a «reinvented» urban shamanism. As I will discuss below, I found not only that there were no traditional rural communities of believers and followers of shamans in the *Darhad* area but also that the making and legitimising of peripheral Darhad shamans is inextricably intertwined with the urban centre.

One of the obvious features of present-day Darhad shamans' practices is that they closely resemble the «traditional» shamanism described in the reports of early explorers: the seances are held in Mongolian felt tents or small one-room block houses in the middle of the night, only dimly lit by a candle. The shaman is dressed by his assistants in the shamanic armour, a gown often made of antelope skin, lined with sable fur, decorated with rattling iron bells, forks and knives as symbolic weapons, and crowned with a feathered headdress covering the shaman's face. The shaman in trance mounts her or his drum, and while s/he is trotting through the inspirational realms of the dark, drumming, singing, and swaying to the rhythm of the drum, the invoked spirits, *ongod*, who are usually metamorphosed former shamans, appear at the seance. One after the other, they are embodied by the shaman and talk to the audience, discuss the submitted problems and treat people afflicted by misfortune. In the capital city, Darhad shamans are renowned as the most traditional and archaic Mongolian shamans: they are called «black» shamans as distinct from the «yellow» shamans of the Buryat, who also venerate Buddhist deities. The

attribution «black» to a shaman can also imply inspirational power or the threat of using black magic. Furthermore, the city dwellers' imagination of the *Darhad* borderland with its *taiga* forests, snow covered mountain peaks, crystal clear lakes and formidable cold in winter as the wildest place of Mongolia contributes to the shamans' reputation.

### «Market economy» shamans

The reputation Darhad shamans enjoy in the capital city contrasts with an atmosphere of contestation in their home area: Whenever I told people in the Darhad area about my subject of study, they laughed, questioning that there were any «real» shamans left, and accused the present-day shamans of being «market economy» shamans aiming to gain economic profit only. In gatherings of neighbours it could well happen that after I was furnished with gossip about present-day shamans, one of the men with local authority would start to entertain an attentive audience with stories about the magical capacities of long dead shamans. Despite the dominant denigration of contemporary shamans, people nevertheless sometimes ask one or the other shaman for help in cases of unexplainable inflictions. What particularly causes resentment among the local population was that shamans travel south to the provincial centre *Mörön* and further to the capital city *Ulaanbaatar* to offer their healing services. The dominant argument in blaming shamans for their travels is that in earlier times the drum did not leave the house. Thus private practices at home, which are presented as a consequence of repression during socialism, are turned into a moral imperative in order to confine the social power of shamans in postsocialism.

Despite the local attacks, the capital city has a magnetic attraction for Darhad shamans: like their neighbours, shamans travel south to seek health care and opportunities to gain an income. In *Ulaanbaatar* they settle down with a family for some weeks, and due to word-of-mouth recommendation increasing numbers of clients come to ask for their inspirational services. The audience in the capital usually is not experienced with shamanic seances; people in town neither know the required preparations, nor the symbolism of the ritual, and they usually do not understand more than some fragments of the chants. However, this does not seem to undermine the shamans' authority: it rather appears that the mysterious and enigmatic conversation with spirits enhances the magical capacities of the shaman. Transgressing ordinary states during trance, the

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the reports about the new urban shamans in Mongolia (Merli 2004) or Buryatia (Humphrey 1999; Zhukovskaya 2000).

shaman becomes authorised to deal with essential dangers. People seek the support of shamans for all possible imponderables of life in a postsocialist economy of risk, in which more than a third of the population have become poor, and in which even people with salaried jobs have to do additional business to make a living (Rossabi 2005). The archaic looking shamanic seances connect the busy city dwellers to the imagination of an ancestral and natural order in times of perceived economic and moral disorder.

### Shamans' Associations

The majority of shamans I met have travelled to the capital; some move back and forth between the periphery and the city, and some have even fully settled in *Ulaanbaatar*. An important meeting point for the Darhad shamans in the capital city is the shamans' centre *Golomt Töv* (lit. «hearth centre»), founded in 1996, and the related «Asian Shamanist Continent and World Association» founded in 2000. Darhad shamans visit the centre when they travel to *Ulaanbaatar*, sometimes offering their services at the locality, and during the period of my fieldwork, one after the other the shamans became members of the association and came back home with a certificate attesting that they were Darhad shamans. The shaman Umban told me how he had to pass a verification by the members of the association of his abilities to shamanise by not only calling his own spirits but also by communicating with unfamiliar ones. The shaman explained that he had obtained the certificate because «how else should the tourists know that I am a real shaman?» How should Umban know that for foreign tourists discovering a shaman in the taiga, such a certificate undermines rather than proves his authenticity as a shaman? When asked how many shamans had failed the exam, the association's director, Sühbat, answered: «No one. Somebody who is not a real shaman would not apply for the certificate». In a context where in newspapers shamans are celebrated as well as accused of abusing their capacities for «black magic», the newly founded shamans' associations try to legitimise their members as «real» shamans distinct from «false» ones. The shamanic associations in the capital city aim to promote shamanism – which has been prosecuted in the Mongol territories dominated by Buddhism since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Heissig 1953) – as a genuine Mongolian tradition and primordial religion. In a loose collaboration with Mongolian

and foreign scholars, representatives of public administrations, and tour operators, they organise conferences and public collective rituals of shamans in the surroundings of the capital city for a local public and to attract foreign tourists (Schlehe and Weber 2001). Likewise, rituals aimed at promoting shamanism as an attraction for an international audience are also arranged in the *Darhad* area, usually at the shore of Lake *Hövsgöl*, one of the primary tourist sites of the country<sup>3</sup>.

### Displaced as the «wild other»

Merli (2006) and Stépanoff (2004) discuss these public collective rituals organised by shamans' associations as «tradition» as invented by a newly institutionalised urban shamanism. Although I agree with this analysis, I would relocate the perspective slightly: my concern is how the Darhad shamans, beyond their participation in such rituals, are integrated into this imagination of tradition. The new public rituals focus on the worship of nature. The Darhad shamans' evocation of ancestor spirits located in particular places and their relationships with masters of the land and the water are thereby reframed and integrated into a global ecodiscourse. In a similar move, the Mongolian government has nominated the lake and the bordering areas as «Lake Hövsgöl Tsaatan shamanistic landscape» for the Unesco World Heritage list. With this nomination, the shamans and the neighbouring reindeer herders are associated with the pristine nature of the national parks of Lake *Hövsgöl* and the *Horidal Saridag* mountain range into an imaginative space of the untamed wild. Thus shamans, who in fact interact intensively with the centre, are discursively displaced—as an untamed counter image for the urban self, and as such, they are domesticated through collective urban rituals. This discursive production of archaic Darhad shamanism in the urban centre opens opportunities for present-day Darhad shamanizing people to legitimise their practices and to gain reputations as shamans. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, explorers and anthropologists described Siberian and Inner Asian shamans as peripheral practitioners persecuted first by the Buddhist and Orthodox Church, and later by the anti-religious policy of the socialist state. In present-day Mongolia, shamans are not only free to practice but also celebrated as symbols of traditional culture as well as of undomesticated nature in the urban centre – while their legitimacy is questioned and their potential power is confined by neighbours in their home area.

<sup>3</sup> In 2003, I attended two tourist events staging the performance of shamanic rituals and the Tuva / Tsaatan with reindeers: the «Ice Festival» on Lake Hövsgöl at the end of February, and in early July a 5-day shamanistic tour with performances of two female Darhad shamans in a tourist camp, which was part of the Mongolian government's tourism initiative «Visit Mongolia». Usually, however, tourists and shamans meet informally: the tourist guide brings the guests to a shaman in the area.

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