

BALOGH MÁTYÁS

CONTEMPORARY BURIAD SHAMANISM IN MONGOLIA

PhD theses

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem

Bölcsészettudományi Kar

Nyelvtudományi Doktori Iskola

Budapest, 2011

1. The Aim of the Thesis

The aim of this dissertation was to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the Buriads' shamanism in Mongolia. Since the majority of the existing studies foreground the *shamar* as if it was the only ritual peculiar to the Mongolian Buriads, I found it of primary importance to explore the other, more frequently performed ones as well, and not only provide fieldwork data on them but categorize as well as analyse them. Secondly, I propose a theory that looks upon spirit-possession from a new, unconventional perspective.

2. The Relationship between Spirits and Inspiration

In my view, in possession-type shamanism such as that of the Buriads, the purpose of rituals is to make spirits descend among people and enable them to communicate face to face. Access to spirits is given by the spirits themselves in the form of divine inspiration. Therefore, inspiration plays a crucial role in spirit-possession, the essential parts of the shamanic rituals of the Mongolian Buriads. Without being inspired enough, a shaman is unable to invoke his/her spirits, and the ritual cannot be completed. When inspiration reaches its climax, the shaman is believed to be possessed by a spirit, who takes over the shaman's place in the ritual. In order to understand the relationship between inspiration and spirits I find it essential to answer the following question: Why are shamans believed to be absent during possession? An explanation of this thought might be that the ideal shaman can be as much inspired that s/he completely abandons him/herself to the impersonation of a spirit. Thus the possessed shaman is taken by his/her own inspiration, which is traditionally interpreted as being taken by his/her spirit. Based on this rationale, when shamans perform their regular spirit-pleasing rituals, they unleash their inspiration, and by doing that they prevent themselves from falling mentally ill due to restrained emotions and suffocated inspiration. According to shamanists, if spirits are suppressed, they will get angry and torture the shaman. Therefore, in my opinion, when we speak about a shaman being tortured by his/her neglected spirits we might as well speak about a shaman tortured by his/her unutilized inspiration. Furthermore, we can look upon shamans' spirits as inspirations that human imagination personalized, and thus different sorts of inspirations have become different characters in the shamanist pantheon. Some inspirations directly come from recently deceased persons (for example when possessed by his/her mother's spirit, the shaman may act like his/her mother used to act); in these cases, the connection between the inspiration and the character does not need any further explanation.

People who lived a long time ago—and became spirits after death—are also impersonated by shamans, but since they could not know these people personally, in their characterization, the shaman has to draw upon the old shamanic traditions that depict the given spirit's personality. Such a spirit is Awagaldai, for example, who—according to legend—was a man having a great liking for vodka and tobacco, so whenever he is on stage, the shaman acts the role of a chain-smoking drunkard. The spirit-characters are reflected not only in the shaman's portrayals of spirits but also by the costume the shaman wears. Although high-ranking shamans have more requisites and more pieces of clothing than lower-ranking ones, what a shaman wears during a ritual does not necessarily bespeak his/her place in shamanic hierarchy. Even the highest ranking shaman who possesses a helmet with iron antlers and a suede coat is unlikely to put on these articles every time s/he performs a ritual. If the spirit s/he intends to invoke and impersonate is not a particularly "strong" spirit, s/he might wear a simple costume and dress like a lower-ranking shaman. Rank determines what kind of rituals a shaman can perform and what spirits s/he can invoke, but once a spirit possesses a shaman, the shaman's rank, age or social status does not matter because—as noted above—s/he is believed to be absent. The one who wears the shamanic costume is no longer the shaman but the spirit.

3. Mongolian Buriad Shamanism in the Mongol Cultural Region

The Mongol Cultural Region is home to at least three different shamanic traditions. These exist at the peripheries of the region, and in terms of their pantheon, shamanic incantations and paraphernalia they exhibit significant discrepancies with each other and striking similarities with adjacent shamanic traditions. The three traditions are the following: 1. Darxad shamanism in north-western Mongolia, which shares many commonalities with the shamanism of the neighbouring Tuvas and Caatans (Duxas), 2. Xorchin shamanism in south-eastern Inner-Mongolia, which is greatly influenced by Manchu and Sibe shamanic traditions, and 3. Buriad shamanism, which shares many of its characteristics with the shamanism of the Bargas, Daurs and Ewenks.

4. Types of Shamans

Interpreters

Although the interpreter is not a shaman type, s/he has well defined functions during shamanic rituals. The interpreter is the shaman's assistant, who not only interprets the words of the spirits to everyday language but offers them liquor, tobacco and food as well. The interpreter is the one who knows how to communicate with the spirits and in what order it is necessary to give them the offerings. In fact, the interpreter is the one who actually mediates between the spirits and the audience, while the shaman only places his/her body at the disposal of a spirit. Interpreters do not have any requisites or costumes of their own, nor are they initiated into shamanhood or declared to a higher level of their abilities by consecration rituals. The interpreter is not necessarily a specialist. Anyone who knows the shamanic traditions and understands the words of the spirits is employable as an interpreter. Moreover, the interpreter can be dispensed with. If nobody is available for this task, the shaman usually asks someone from the audience before the ritual to help, and s/he often explains some of the most important phrases the spirits might say, in advance. Since interpreting is only a task and not their profession (in contrast with shamans), most interpreters are referred to by this term only during the rituals they interpret. In most of the cases, this task is undertaken by one of the particular shaman's relatives or another shaman not possessed by a spirit, for they usually know well their demands and what they say.

White Shamans

White shamans are not regarded as "real shamans" but as bonesetters. They are able to set broken and sprinkled bones, and they are good at massotherapy and are familiar with the medical treatments of minor illnesses. During their rituals, they invoke Buddhist divinities, the most important of whom is the White Old Man. Instead of the drum of the black shamans, the white ones have a bell—the same type of bell as the one used by Buddhist monks in the lamaseries and the severe or heavy with the light or smooth. White shamans and their rituals are characterized as soft and light, which means that their rituals are easy to perform, they do not involve blood sacrifice or killing of animals, and the shamans do not shout loudly, do not jump and dance vigorously, nor do they fall unconscious or foam at the mouth during their rituals. In this respect the practice of white shamans is indeed similar to that of Buddhist practitioners, but it does not necessarily mean that white shamans (or yellow shamans in other parts of the Mongol cultural region) came into existence by the spread of Buddhism. It is more

probable that the distinction of powerful and less powerful shamanic practitioners had existed for a much longer time, and when Buddhism became widespread, less powerful shamanic practitioners adopted many of the Buddhist practitioners' characteristics. The costume of the Mongolian Buriad white shaman resembles the traditional Buriad costume. Ordinary Mongolian people also wear a similar costume when, for example, they are having a photo taken on the occasion of a solemn event. The traditional garment is a means that connects people with the past and makes them similar and thus acceptable to their ancestors. It is believed that during ceremonial acts, people get closer to the spirits of their ancestors, and they can be exposed to their wrath if not dressed properly. When the white shaman dons his/her costumes, s/he prepares for getting into contact with spiritual powers. The most important article of the costume is the hat or cap or anything that covers the top of the head, i.e. the part of the body most of all exposed to forces descending from above and thus being the most vulnerable. Not only religious specialists but also ordinary people in Mongolia cover their heads when offering sacrifices to spirits or gods.

Black Shamans

According to a popular opinion of shamans in Mongolia, black shamans are dangerous people for they have the power to harm or even kill others by calling down curses on them. On the other hand, they are believed to have the power to neutralize other shamans' curses and to abolish the demons that cause serious illnesses. Buriad black shamans, similarly to warriors, also have weapons, which can be found on their costumes and whips. These weapons are believed to have been forged by Damdin Dorlig, the patron deity of blacksmiths, who is also regarded as the blacksmith and armourer of shamans. Based upon the idea that a shaman is an armed warrior, we can assume that in earlier times, those who were in lack of physical or mental strength and thus did not have the potential to take their share of battles and fights found their way out of this situation by becoming warriors of an invisible realm. The members of their community believed that they were the only ones who could defeat the invisible enemies, i.e. the harmful spirits who caused diseases and misfortunes.

It is inevitable to note that many of the Buriad shamans in Mongolia are black-and-white shamans, which means that they can wear either the white or the black shamanic costume, or use both white and black accessories at the same time.

5. The Rituals of Mongolian Buriad Shamans

The shamanic rituals of the Mongolian Buriads consist of smaller ritual acts. These acts can precede a possession, take place during possession or follow it. Therefore I refer to these three groups of acts as pre-possessional, possessional and post-possessional acts respectively. Pre-possessional acts are intended to call the spirits' attention to the ritual and ask them to participate and some of them to possess the shaman. The communication between a possessing spirit and the participants of the ritual consists of a number of possessional activities. These usually include: greeting and welcoming the spirit, conversation with the spirit (usually with the help of an interpreter), the spirit's monologue, the spirits blessing and the spirit's departure. After a possession is over, another one—preceded by an invocation—might take place. After the last spirit has left the shaman's body, the shaman performs the post-possessional acts, which lead to the end of the ritual. By means of divination the shaman inquires the spirits whether the ritual appealed to them and whether they are content with the offerings. If the spirits are satisfied, the shaman asks them to protect him/herself and the community against misfortune and illnesses and to bestow good luck and prosperity. If the divination indicates that the spirits are not fully content for some reasons, the shaman corrects the mistake, usually by offering or promising to offer more sacrifices or sacrifices of better quality and repeats the divination until it shows that the spirits are satisfied. Before the end of the ritual the shaman entrusts each participant's fate to the spirits, prodding them with his/her whip or drumstick and chanting a song. In this song s/he asks his/her spirits to take care for the person being entrusted. All the spirits who have been invited to the ritual, including those who have possessed and then left the shaman are considered to be present at the ritual scene until the shaman dispatches them by singing a specific song. In this song the shaman asks the spirits, to return whence they came; to rocks and bushes in the wilderness.

6. Ritual Types

Most of the Mongolian Buriads' shamanic rituals can easily be classified either as spirit-pleasing or problem solving rituals. Nonetheless, there are rituals that do not fit easily into either of these categories; such are the imprecations and the consecration rituals. Therefore, for all the rituals that are not spirit-pleasing rituals (i.e. for problem-solving rituals, imprecations and consecrations), I created the category "entreating rituals", implying that during these rituals the shaman turns to the spirits with a request. Imprecations and problem-solving rituals are various—depending on the particular problem

that has to be solved or on the kind of the curse a client wishes to call down on his/her adversary. These, I think, are not subtypes but variants. On the other half, the consecration ritual has originally two subtypes: black shamans' and white shamans' consecrations, and recently, due to the growing number of candidates, sometimes black and white shamans are consecrated at the same time, and thus the third subtype—consecration for black and white shamans—emerged. The rituals that belong to the other large category, i.e. spirit-pleasing rituals, are joyous festivities, banquets intended to entertain the spirits on a regular basis, lest they feel neglected and vent their resentment on the shaman and the community. There are small-scale and large-scale spirit-pleasing rituals; the former are performed three times a month, always indoors, at the shaman's home, while large-scale spirit-pleasing rituals are conducted almost always outside, once a year. There is one exception, the Lunar New Year ritual, which is the first of those indoor rituals in the year that are performed three times a month; it tends to be large-scale though. We can summarize the rituals a Mongolian Buriad shaman habitually performs as the following:

- Small-scale, indoor spirit-pleasing rituals are held three times a month in order to maintain the good relationship with spirits and to prevent them from wreaking vengeance on the shaman.
- The Lunar New Year ritual is conducted on the ninth day of the first lunar month. This is an annually held, large-scale version of the above type with the same purpose.
- Rituals performed at clients' requests: problem-solving rituals and imprecations. These rituals are the main sources of a shaman's income. The frequency of these kinds of performances varies, and entirely depends on how often the shaman is requested by clients.
- From April to October, a Mongolian Buriad shaman can take part in a number of annually held large-scale, communal sacrifices, which are attended by shamans from all over the country; consequently, they are not typically Buriad rituals. These are newly emerged rituals and are usually organized by shamanic associations at different sites in Mongolia. At these sites, the way Buriad shamans perform their rituals resembles how they perform a Lunar New Year or a consecration ritual.
- Once a year or in more years a Mongolian Buriad shaman goes through a consecration ritual and ascends in shamanic hierarchy. If a shaman is a master and conducts the ritual for his/her apprentices, s/he normally gets paid for it, and thus this ritual becomes another source of income to him/her.

7. Consecration of Black and White Shamans

Besides problem-solving and spirit-pleasing rituals, Buriad shamans perform a large-scale ritual that can neither be described as a problem-solving nor as an entirely spirit-pleasing ritual. This ritual is often referred to as the initiation or consecration ritual of Buriad shamans. The Buriads distinguish between consecrations of black and white shamans. The black shaman's consecration is called *shantar*, while the white shaman's is called *shandruu*. The ritual during which both black and white shamans are consecrated is often referred to as *shantar-shandruu*. The term "initiation", which is most often used in the literature, denotes only one aspect of the *shantar* or *shandruu* since this ritual is not a single initiation through which candidates can become shamans, but a sequence of rituals by which they can ascend to higher and higher levels of the shamanic hierarchy. Shamans having completed more *shantar* or *shandruu* are believed to have more power and more experience. A shaman's power and experience, i.e. his/her rank in the shamanic society, is indicated by his/her paraphernalia and the accessories attached to his/her costume. If we examine the above types of rituals, we can find the relation between them. The spirit-pleasing ones are meant to prevent afflictions as well as guarantee the spirit's helpfulness in entreating rituals. If the spirits are well remembered and treated well, they will not only refrain from evil doing but they will be more willing to give what the shaman asks for on behalf of his/her clients.

On the other hand, a shaman not only earns his/her living but secures his/her position in the community by performing problem-solving rituals (and also "problem-causing" imprecations). Finally, by going through more and more consecrations a shaman is allowed to perform more and more challenging rituals and solve more and more serious problems. In summary, the main purpose a shaman's practice serves is to solve clients' problems, and all the other (i.e. not problem-solving) rituals—though inevitable—are ancillary rituals in the sense that they are all intended to enable the shaman solving problems efficiently.

8. Summary

Besides elaborating on my above theses I discussed some interesting phenomena that recently appeared in Mongolian Buriad shamanism. These are the following:

1. Mongolian Buriad shamans are in frequent contact with non-Buriad Mongolian shamans and thus they often learn from each-other's practices and ideas.

2. The language of Mongolian Buriads, especially those living in the capital have been under a strong Xalx influence and as a result, many of my informants use Xalx in their everyday lives while the usage of Buriad is restricted to shamanic rituals.
3. In contemporary Mongolian shamanism the number of apprentices a shaman-master has is often the benchmark of his/her prestige. Due to the relatively small population of Mongolian Buriads recruiting many apprentices is only possible if the master accepts non-Buriad apprentices as well. Thus the number of non-Buriad, mostly Xalx, young shamans who practise shamanism according to Buriad traditions has rapidly increased in the past two decades.

The frequent contact with non-Buriad Mongolian shamans, the Xalx lingual and cultural dominance, the establishment of the Mongolian Shamans' Golomt Centre and its operation has created an environment in which the shamanism of the Mongolian Buriads is becoming part of a gradually emerging Pan-Mongolian shamanism.