

Who 'Makes' the Shaman?: The Politics of Shamanic Practices among the Buriats in Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

The number of shamans among the Buriats of Dornod in Mongolia has been dramatically increasing since the mid 1980s, when the gradual dissolution of the socialist system and Soviet domination took place. By placing the shamanic practices in a context of historico-political changes, the paper questions what constitutes a shamanic practice and what makes and what unmakes a shaman nowadays. The paper examines the shamanic experience of the Dagdan shaman and his relationship with his community, in order to illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of shamanic practice. While the locals' knowledge of spirits (*ongons*), the belief in their own lineage *ongons* and the local standards for moral disposition all control and limit a shaman's power and prestige, the shaman attempts to supersede the local standards by restoring symbolic capital and by seeking power and recognition outside of the community. The search for power and recognition outside of the community becomes the shaman's arena for creating, transforming and acting out multiple identities: ethnic, national and personal.

INTRODUCTION

I was fourteen when I suddenly got terribly sick. I had almost nothing left untouched by illness. My liver, my lungs, my kidneys were gone. I could not resist a simple cold or 'flu. Doctors, lamas, to whom my parents secretly took me, would help me for a few days or months, but I would get sick again after I got home. I was able to finish high school, but I was barely fit for university. I used to take long leaves of absence from school and spend months in the countryside with my relatives. It took me more than seven years to complete a five year program at the university. The final

devastating blow was a diagnosis of mental illness. People thought I was mad, and I was convinced it was true. I suffered for almost ten years, until I met my future in-laws. It was my future wife's father who told me to seek a shaman and become an apprentice.

Shaman Jigid told me the story of his illness and subsequent initiation into shamanhood only once, in very lean prose, and I had to keep asking him questions in order to expand my notes. I explained to shaman Jigid that I was doing my doctorate in anthropology in the United States, and that I was interested in shamanic practices and the Buriat traditions. Shaman Jigid nodded his head saying, 'Ah, yes, yes, something like *kandidai nauk*? the professors from the National University of Mongolia visited me, they did some research and all got their degrees'. He was pleased to see my motivation to learn about his practice. He is one of the few shamans who did not assume that I wanted to become a shamaness, or to get some of his secret 'knowledge'.

Having been a biology teacher at the Nalaikh high school for almost thirty years, shaman Jigid is convinced that 'real science is something that you can empirically test'. I first visited shaman Jigid in 1996 in Nalaikh (a town 60 km. east of Ulaanbaatar), which was a coal-mining centre prior to the economic disruptions that have occurred since the late 1980s. Jigid and his family welcomed us into their spacious, though sparsely furnished, two-bedroom apartment in downtown Nalaikh. One of the first things shaman Jigid told me was, 'Shamanism is not a science; you cannot set up a test in a laboratory and there is no repetition of the same phenomenon, so that you can only observe. Unfortunately, in your studies, you have to rely on the phenomenon you have seen only once, on what people tell you, and for the most part you have to believe them.' Shaman Jigid's depiction of *me doing my research* presumed very little activity on my part. At that time I was worried that the Jigid shaman would not accept me as a participant or a temporary member of his community, but only as quiet and unobtrusive observer. I could not tell whether or not he was tired of visitors, anthropologists and clients, and therefore wanted some distance from me, or was he just warning me that studying shamans is a difficult task? On the one hand, I was a student, and not a professor; I was also unmarried, female and not a Buriat, but Khalkha (on which basis it could be presumed that I have would no clue about Buriat customs). On the other hand, the Jigid shaman was an old and respected person. The contrast in our social positions dictated some culturally accepted norms of power in the relationship. From the very beginning I was aware that, in anthropological terms, my studies were going to be 'studying up'. My gender and age raised some doubt as to whether or not I would be able to pursue my studies to a fruitful end. Young women are often mistrusted by other academics in Mongolia, and it is often claimed that women drop out of academia once they have a husband and children. I could see that I was a real puzzle to Jigid shaman and, later, to my other informants.

When I asked other Buriat shamans what motivated them to choose the path of a shaman, they would tell me a story that very much resembled the one shaman Jigid had confided to me. The story would follow this outline: a young man becomes ill and tries out different types of medicine, but only apprenticeship with a shaman saves his life. This type of illness story is prevalent among Darkhat shamans.³ It is the so-called 'shaman's illness' – a sickness that leaves no choice for an individual but to become a shaman.

The mysterious illness episode is only the beginning of a long path to shamanic practice. Although by becoming a shaman one cures one's illness, now the shaman accepts a life-long commitment: pursuing emotional and physical hardships to fulfil his or her vocation. 'A person becomes a shaman not by his choice. To be a shaman is a burden and brings suffering. A shaman does not have the basic freedom that other people can enjoy. I do not wish this destiny upon anyone. If I could choose my destiny, I would not hesitate for a minute to become just an ordinary person, not a shaman', said one of my main informants, shaman Naidan. While shaman Jigid's illness narrative introduced me to the incidents which lead an individual to begin to follow the path of shamanhood, shaman Naidan's remark gave me a hint about investigating the lives of shamans beyond that initiation illness. A shamanic illness is the bodily manifestation of a necessity for the individual to contact the spirits. However, by virtue of establishing contacts with the spirits, the shaman simultaneously enters a wide web of different networks. For the purpose of analysis, in this paper I distinguish two major networks of a shaman: the spirit world and the social world. The boundaries of these worlds can be seen as being fluid, since during rituals the differences between humans and spirits may blur significantly.

As a member of a spiritual world, the shaman is in constant relationship with the spirits of his own lineage, and with those sent to him by other shamans, for good or for ill. The shaman confronts all kinds of little spiritual beings that follow the main spirits, or just wander around in search of food or other earthly pleasures. As a member of the social world, the shaman becomes a part of a power struggle with his or her fellow shamans and with the practitioners of other religions. Compared to other people, who do not possess shamanic power, the shaman is more involved with local politics and the social life of the community. A power struggle is not only a 'religious' thing; it is also related to the person's place in a given community. While some shamans purposefully aim for power, and compete with other shamans by performing different rituals, the others have no choice but to react to these rituals. To be specific, *harzal* (cursing) is a common way of fighting; there are many different types of *harzal* and some of them aim to kill the other person. In any case, the person who has been affected by someone's *harzal* is supposed either to send the *harzal* back or to send it somewhere else, where it can lose its way and disappear. A shaman who returns the *harzal* performs the ritual out of necessity, and thus becomes involved involuntarily in a power struggle and in a shamanic network. Protecting one

person from *harzal* can harm another and, in particular, put the shaman himself into a vulnerable position. What I am trying to say here is that shamans enter the web of power relations, not only by choice, but also out of the necessity to protect others and themselves. There is another dimension to the social world: a shaman has to build up his or her authority and confidence, and win the recognition and respect of the community. He can do this only if he has a good relationship with the spirit world. To please his spirits, he needs to be good to them, and to have enormous outside support. A shaman is trapped in a circle of power and dependence, both on a spirit world and on a human world. A shaman's reputation is fluid, multi-dimensional, temporal, and is constantly challenged in different social settings.

Competition for an audience is another reason for power struggles among shamans. As I shall argue, a shaman must be acknowledged by the local people. In Pigg's account of Nepali shamans (1996), village gossip determines the truthfulness of the shamans, and in Atkinson's studies on Wana shamans (1989), the audience is seen to determine the power of the shaman. In this paper I shall discuss how local knowledge about shamanic practices and local understanding of a person's moral attributes determine the idea of a shaman for a community, and how these local idioms serve as a constraint upon some individual shamans.

This paper is concerned with what constitutes a shaman as a practitioner in the local world of the Buriats of Dornod in late 20th century Mongolia. Today, a shaman does not resemble someone like the famous *Teb Tengri* from *The Secret History of the Mongols*, who foresees the future and discovers 'the mandate of heaven' for the imperial court in the thirteenth century – all vividly illustrated by Humphrey (1994). No longer is he a mediator between the supernatural and human worlds, as he was for the 'archaic' hunting societies of Siberia, as presented by Hamydon (1994). Hunting simply is not the main occupation of the Buriats of Dornod these days. How, and in what ways, do local people acknowledge an individual as a shaman nowadays? How does a shaman manoeuvre in a community that holds together as a social and cultural unit yet, at the same time, is divided into autonomous parts at once fusing and fracturing? What happens when the locals and his fellow shamans challenge a shaman's power? I shall seek an answer to these questions by examining three dynamics that affect shamanic practices: the historical circumstances, specific attributes of shamanic practice, and the social relationship of a shaman with a community. Due to the nature of the questions I pursue, the third dynamic – the social relationship of a shaman with a community – will dominate the discussion. However, the social relationships should not and cannot be discussed in isolation from the former two dynamics: historical circumstances and shamanic attributes.

This paper is based on a study of the Buriat shamanic practices in post-socialist Mongolia in the *sum*.⁴ I call Onon in Dornod province in northeastern Mongolia, bordering the Buriat republic of Russia. In the summer of 1997 in the

Onon *sum*, out of of 2000 people, 10 percent identified themselves as shamans and as practising shamanic rituals. This includes newly established shamans as well as those who had been practising secretly for years during the socialist times. Initiation ceremonies were held all over the district throughout the summer, with scarcely a break. In this paper I consider the rapid revival of shamanic practices as arising from the dynamics of social relations in a local world, and I questions how far the issue can be construed as a resurgence of Buriat ethnic identity.

By historical circumstances, I mean the political and economic changes related to Mongolia's shift from socialism and Soviet control to a democratic form of governance and the free market, since early 1990. The fall of Mongolia's socialist regime resulted in the gradual dissolution of the multilevel bureaucratic apparatus in the local *sums*, and in the freeing of previously prohibited religious, ethnic or culturally distinctive practices. Individuals got the freedom to travel abroad without government permits and to engage in businesses. By 1996, people in Onon *sum* had been freely travelling to Russian Buryatia as well as to Manchuria, to engage in trading. Local cashmere and wool were shipped or smuggled to the two neighbouring countries in exchange for flour, rice, and other food items, as well as cloth and clothing. As part of a government privatisation project, collective farms were demolished and the animals distributed to the people in the *sums*. In Onon *sum* the distribution of collective farm animals was carried out without the necessary preparation and warning to the *sum* people. The sudden distribution of animals during December 1993 resulted in a large number of animal deaths. Neither hay nor necessary winter accommodation for the newly born cattle had been prepared in advance. During the socialist regime, because collective farms were based on an elaborate division of labour, individuals had specialised in certain aspects of animal husbandry. As a result of this specialisation many people had lost the skills required for herding viable stock, which include all aspects of animal husbandry from hay preparation to helping to deliver a calf or foal.

Elders are highly respected in a society where the livelihood of people depends on their knowledge. Socialist division of labour had made people less dependent on their elders, but as soon as the collective farms were closed, the knowledge of the elders became of crucial importance. While families with older parents and relatives were often able to save their allocation of livestock, many who did not have such support, or who were employed in the civil service, for example, had little luck keeping their share of animals. Many of the families in Onon *sum* lost all their livestock and became impoverished in a single winter. The collapse of the lumber business, which was the main economic activity of Onon *sum*, cut off the monthly salaries which many people had for several decades been accustomed to receiving. The initial result of the democratic form of governance and the new market economy has been a notable emergence of social classes based on material wealth, as opposed to the social hierarchy of

socialism. During socialism, while the pursuit of material wealth was strictly discouraged for the entire population of Mongolia, it was open to a small group of ruling elite. Capitalism in its most merciless form has been quick to sort people into rich and poor, fit and non-fit, lucky and unlucky. The post-socialist context within which shamanic practices have been reviving is a social environment characterised by the competitive atmosphere of the new market economy and the freedom of a democratic form of governance. The socialist state used to take care of decisions and choices. The newly established democratic government no longer carries out these functions. Shamanic practices have been much needed during this time of anxiety and uncertainty, to take over some of the functions of the state. The historical circumstances of the post-socialist state have thus favoured shamanic practices, which are to some extent the product of the drastic economic changes.

As specific attributes of shamanic practice I ascribe three types of shamanic belongings: material objects, symbolic knowledge and ritual rules. They are the cultural capital of the shamans, who carefully protect and sanctify them. *Material objects* include costumes and all decorations, and musical instruments, including the shaman's drum, bell, and different instruments for shaking. It is highly important for the shaman to own a ritual item that comes from his intellectual lineage or from another important shaman (though usually, shamans' belongings do not come directly from another shaman). It is believed that such items have charisma, and confer on the shaman a charismatic power, and ownership of special items is important for a shaman's self respect, as well as for his political standing. Shamans may also prize possessions out of pride and affection for a deceased ancestor, or as a memento of a teacher. Owning a symbolic item from a powerful shaman already presupposes the transfer of power to the owner. *Symbolic knowledge* is a shaman's knowledge about his or her ancestors, and of myths and oral histories. *Ritual rules* are instructions for carrying out public and private ceremonies, how to evoke certain spirits, and what and how to offer to the spirits, methods of divination and so on.

As for today, shamanic practices in Dornod are known as *tsaganii böö* ('white' shamanism) and *sharin böö* ('yellow' shamanism). Instead of the word *böö*, which means a shaman, people also use the word *yim*, basically meaning *a thing*. Buriat shamans define themselves in opposition to the 'black' (i.e. 'pure') shamanism of Darkhats,⁵ who are the reindeer herders in the extreme north of Mongolia. Buriat shamanism is 'yellow' and not 'black' because it has been influenced by the yellow sect of Buddhism (Lamaism). Some practitioners call themselves 'white' if they are entitled to treat physical as well as mental illness. As one of my informants explained, 'white' is a colour of more 'humanitarian' practices, as opposed to the 'black' shamanic practices. 'White' and 'yellow' shamans claim that they do not perform rituals of cursing, 'black magic' and sorcery for the purpose of harming a person, as 'black shamans' are

said to do. They perform those ceremonies only to defend their patients, while 'black' shamans do these things with no preference or caution. Not all Buriat shamans are healers, in the sense that they do not have healer-spirits in their lineage. Buriat shamanic practitioners vary greatly, and over time they develop their own styles of performance, acquire their major individual and tutelary spirits, and follow their own sets of rules and variations on the ceremonies. There is even a saying in Mongolian, '*böü böögin bööiöh ondo...*', literally meaning that every shaman shamanises differently from every other. While there is an established and publicly recognised set of spirit pantheons, as well as a basic set of sequences in ritual that every shaman must follow, each ceremony ends up as a complete masterful performance, embodying its own distinct genius. Individual shamans' performances, audience, clients, the social and economic conditions, purposes for carrying out the rituals, even the weather and the household circumstances – all greatly affect the rituals, so that there is always a variation from the standard ritual.

Shamans in Dornod fall into the following categories: *böü* (shaman), a generic term for a practitioner who has passed through at least one stage of the initiation ceremony (*shanaŋ*), can evoke a spirit and become possessed by it, or can communicate with spirits for special purposes; *udgan* is a word used to refer to a female shaman; *tulmaachi* (doctors or healers); and *bariachi* (bonesetters). However, the distinctions vary from person to person, and often a shaman can be skilled in both healing and bone-setting. Since the lineage *orgons* choose both men and women, the intellectual lineage of shamanic practice does not coincide with the patrilineal kinship pattern of the family. The difference between female and male shamans will be discussed elsewhere.

The relationship of a shaman with a community is a deep and vast topic. In this paper I concentrate on how the knowledge of the local people about shamanic practices allows them to exercise power over the shamans. Knowledge about the shamans is passed on in the form of myths, oral histories and the lively conversations with spirits which take place when a shaman becomes possessed by a spirit during the ceremonies.

Most of the myths and oral histories I encountered depict shamans as heroic and altruistic individuals who sacrificed themselves to save the lives and ensure the wellbeing of their fellow villagers. The legendary Baljir udgan organised a visit to the (Empress) Tsaritsa Ekaterina II, to petition her about the difficult situation of the Buriats in Tsarist Russia. The Buriats, who had to pay taxes in furs, were squeezed on to high hill lands and mountain slopes, while Russians occupied the fertile river basins. The delegation planned to petition on behalf of all the Buriats in Russia for a reduction in taxes, and for the Buriats to be allowed access to the bigger and better pastures. During the trip, the party ran out of food, and death seemed inevitable. Baljir udgan cut some flesh from her own body to feed the delegation. She died, but her flesh lasted them the entire trip, and the

team were able to hand in their petition. Subsequently, the Russian Tsarist government lessened the burden of taxes on the Buriats, and they were allowed access to better land.

In the past, the shamans were more powerful and were seen to be more skilled in their magic and more capable of helping people out. The stories mostly depict the good characteristics of shamans, and for the most part people remember good shamans through anecdotes about particular events, or accounts of fascinating and magical encounters. There is a difference between the knowledge that is passed from generation to generation and the practice of shamans in the community today. One of the dynamics of the relationship between local people and the shamans is that many people view the living shamans through the lens of the 'good' shamans, images of whom are distributed through myth and oral history. The fact is that the stories are about events and not necessarily about people themselves. While the expectations of the shamans remain, the lives of today's shamans have no such fascinating stories attached to them. Another dynamic of the relationship is that locals have standards for moral disposition. Not every shaman fits to their expectations of dignity and modesty, considered necessary attributes for a shaman.

Jane Atkinson's discussion of shamanic audience among the Wana of Sulawesi, Indonesia (1989) and Stacey Leigh Pigg's analysis of villagers' scepticism about shamanic efficacy in Nepali villages (1996) illuminate and help to explain the relationship of the Buriat shamanic practitioners with the local community. Specifically, Atkinson's illustration of how an individual maintains the 'freshness' of shamanic powers adds a dimension to understanding the dynamics of shamanic practices (1989: 316). A shaman 'keeps up his charisma' (Atkinson uses Weber's words [1963: 32]) by engaging spirit familiars, by telling stories about his adventures, by introducing new spirits during the ceremonies, and by pursuing his knowledge and skills in general. Of course, ritual actions, artistic performance, skills in mediation between humans and spirits or in controlling the spirits, all constitute the heart of shamanic practices. However, Atkinson points to another important aspect of understanding shamanic power. Wana shamans must attract the attention of the *audience* (author's emphasis) and aim for its commitment, engagement and acknowledgment. If the audience neglects the shaman, the resultant injury may be as serious as death of the shaman during spirit possession (1989: 219). The vulnerable situation of a shaman is an important factor shaping the shaman's identity and his or her relationship with his fellow shamans and with the broader community. Pigg's (1996) analysis of the role of local cross-talk in constructing 'belief' as an object of debate for Nepalese is also relevant to our discussion of a shaman's power and its acknowledgment by the villagers. By situating shamans in the local conception of modernity, Pigg cites different forms of sceptical village talk about shamans. She suggests that 'the pervasive scepticism toward shamans reminds

all concerned that it is possible to withhold belief. In the end, that is what makes shamans truly 'believable' (1996: 185). Both authors argue that the community produces a shaman for itself as much as the shamans build their own reputation and power. By doing this, they represent the villagers or local people as agents in their own right. The shaman is not the only authoritative person in politics; he is fully dependent on the people around him. Placing the shamans in their local context may shed light on what actually constitutes a shaman.

This paper builds on the story of a particular shaman, supported by or contrasted with evidence from stories of other shamans. By privileging the stories of individual shamans I can let the voices of individuals speak for themselves. I hope this will express the multiple identities of shamans, and the tensions in the community. I must emphasise that I am talking about individuals, not about Buriat shamans in general. Because I allow the individuals speak for themselves, my knowledge as an ethnographer is 'situated', to use Haraway's words; it comes from a 'limited location' and is 'produced both in and for a specific context' (Haraway in K. Visweswaran 1994: 49). Storytelling is, in my view, the best way to show the interactions of individual shamans.

THE STORY OF THE DAGDAN SHAMAN

In the following pages, I present the story of a Buriat shaman, whom I call Dagdan, focusing on his relationship with his apprentices, fellow shamans and with the people in his community in Onon *sum* of Dornod province. I have changed their names as well as the name of the *sum*, but I have kept the names of the bigger places such as Ulaanbaatar, Nalakh and Dornod. Before I left the Onon *sum* I asked my informants whether or not they would prefer their names and placenames to be mentioned in a publication. Without hesitation, my informants asked me to disguise this information. They chose anonymity, and I respect their wish.

Dagdan as a Shaman and a Lama

As happened to many religious practitioners, Dagdan shaman was persecuted during the socialist regime and sent to prison twice, once in the seventies and again in the early eighties. 'All for shamanic practice', he explained. In prison, he did a lot of wood-carving, which he continues to do today. Born in a family of *malchin* (generic term for people engaged in pastoral nomadism), Dagdan shaman has always been a *malchin*, but his identity as a shaman all but overrules the *malchin* part of his identity and occupation. Since he lives in the country and does not have any residence in the *sum* centre, it is assumed that he is a *malchin*. When political control over religious and 'traditional' practices loosened up in

the late eighties, he became one of the best-known shamans of Dornod province; lately, his popularity has spread to Ulaanbaatar as well.

Agreeing with Zhukovskaya, Caroline Humphrey asserts that during the time of her fieldwork in the 1980s, shamanic practices in Buryatiya in the Soviet Union survived socialist persecution because of the importance of kinship and the ego-centred topology of the ideal patrilineal system. Humphrey constructs a detailed ethnography on *tailgan*: a ceremony of sacrifice to different kinds of spirits and deities. The *tailgan* is a kinship-based ceremony, since it involves the representation of each line within a lineage. *Ug Tailgan* (literally, the 'root', 'genealogy' or 'ancestor' *tailgan*) is the ceremony that specifically celebrates patrilineage (Humphrey: 1983: 408-412).

The importance of kinship and patrilineage to the survival of shamanic practices during communist oppression holds largely true for the Buriats of Mongolia as well. Although in Onon *sum* of Dornod there is no ceremony that strictly resembles the *tailgan* of former Soviet Siberian villages, most of the shamanic ceremonies are based on kinship participation. The essence of various Buriat shamanic practices in Mongolia is the evocation of the spirit of one's ancestor (*ongon*), who was a practising shaman during his own life. The knowledge of one's patrilineage is essential for one's concept of personhood, honour and prestige in the community. The shamanic lineage of a family is strictly tied up with patrilineage, and thus is mentioned every time individuals bring patrilineage into their conversation. Good lineage or root (*udam*) is crucial for ascribing both identity and identification to an individual in the community. Having a powerful *ongon* (the spirit of an ancestral shaman) is important for defining a lineage as a strong one. The Buriats firmly believe that they all have shamanic roots (*bööl udam*) and that everyone of them has an *ongon* in their lineage. Finding one's own roots or *udam* and consequently, finding a lineage *ongon* has become a great concern among the Buriats in Mongolia during the last decade. The stronger the *bööl udam* or the *ongon*, the better the chance of having a strong shaman in the family and the more prestigious the family would be in the community. Today, Buriat Mongols ascribe long term misfortune, chronic diseases, mental illnesses and sudden disasters in the family to a lack of respect paid to familial *ongons*, or to a complete abandonment of the *ongons* in a lineage.

Dagdan is now in his late sixties. As a rare 'survival' of a 'dying' Buriat shamanic tradition, he was once greatly respected in his *sum*, but lately, his glory has been fading away. When individuals and families began reviving their lineage, looking for their *ongons* and publicly announcing them, the Dagdan shaman was in great demand to perform the elaborate ceremonies required to find lineage *ongons*. These ceremonies involve evocation of an *ongon* by the shaman through elaborate singing and drum music, with the support of a chorus and the audience. When the evoked spirit (*ongon*) possesses the shaman's body, the shaman's consciousness is said to leave his body, while the *ongon* moves in.

The spirit speaks to the audience by borrowing the shaman's body. It is believed that the *ongon* knows what people do not know. When the *ongon* possesses a shaman's body it enjoys earthly pleasures such as conversing with people, dancing, eating, drinking, smoking, joking, playing and even flirting. However, the main purpose of evoking the *ongon* is to ask it questions. The task of the person who leads the conversation with the *ongon* is extremely challenging. The *ongon* may be capricious, drunk, busy, or just angry with the audience for a variety of reasons. The *ongon* may demand food or drink that is unavailable, or ask questions that the assembled people cannot answer. It is believed that the *ongon*'s behaviour resembles that of the individual the *ongon* once was. Questions to the *ongon* range from inquiring about one's lineage *ongon* and how to evoke it to asking the future of one's love life.

Dagdan shaman performs these (spirit possession) ceremonies in addition to his regular shamanic practices, such as the day-long initiation (*shanaar*) of new shamans, healing and purification rituals, divination, and all the other rituals performed to pay respect to the fire deity or spirit (*galin tenger, galin burkhan*), the house deity (*hoinorin hogshin*), etc. The fact that during the socialist regime these rituals had to be performed in secret, in remote places in the mountains or deep in the forests, and that the lives of these shamans were at risk, added a heroic and altruistic aura to the identities of the 'surviving' shamans. For the Buriats, after the collapse of socialism in 1990s, shamans such as Dagdan were not only useful diviners, healers and magicians, but also the guardians and preservers of the 'culture' and 'tradition'. I maintain that this was one reason why shamanic practices revived, flourished, and enabled shamans to gain respect and prestige among the local people.

When he was seven years old, the Dagdan shaman was sent by his family to study in a monastery to become a lama. After five years, he fell sick and soon discovered that he was possessed by spirits. For some time he tried to stay in the monastery to continue his education. His parents were convinced that becoming a Buddhist monk would be an easy and good way to make a living. Despite his efforts, he was forced to give up his monastic life to practice shamanism. Shaman Dagdan is now in his late sixties, and the time when he was at a Buddhist monastery as an apprentice coincides with the persecution of religious practitioners in Mongolia in the late 1930s. Shaman Dagdan never responded to my questions about how the state persecution affected his life, nor did he talk about the purging of Buriats at that time. I hope that time will show whether or not this historical incident was of importance in his life or whether he simply did not want to share it with me.

Nowadays shaman Dagdan combines both shamanism and lamaism, and since there are no other shamans of his rank, he granted himself the title of *zaarin* — a chief shaman. The history of shamanic practice in Mongolia is centred on the persecution of the shamans by the Buddhist church. In a discussion (1994) of the

dynamics of Buddhism and shamanism in Inner Asian states, Humphrey suggests that the states in Inner Asia (the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century and the Manchu Qing Dynasty in the seventeenth century) were built up within the context of shamanism. Once the ruling authority had been established making use of the shaman's ability to discover a 'mandate of heaven', shamanism was pushed to the margins and the state promoted Buddhism as the official religion. Humphrey argues that when the states collapsed, Buddhism weakened and shamanic practices re-emerged.

Political struggles between shamanic and Buddhist practices have crystallised in the form of the struggle between the Buddhist and shamanic pantheons in the myths, oral histories, and spirit evoking songs found among the Buriats of Dornod today. Heissig (1970) discusses how Lamaist missionaries, starting in the 16th century, replaced the functions of shamans with similar practices from Lamaism. Heissig notes how, under severe and systematic prohibition of shamanism and the persecution of its followers, the shamans had to give up their leading position and put up with the Lamaist intrusion. In time, Lamaist practice incorporated Buddhist deities into shamanic rituals. The syncretistic nature of the Buriat shamanic folklore is very complex and beyond the scope of this paper.

In the late 20th century, the Mongolian people's demands and expectations of spiritual service differ from those in previous centuries. Whereas, throughout history, shamanic and Buddhist practices were used as tools for negotiating political power, nowadays religious practices have little or no political connotation attached to them. Ritual and healing efficacy are the main motivations for religious practices. However, we must recognise that in specific situations the choice between Buddhist and shamanic practices can be made to demonstrate one's ethnic belonging or to negotiate one's ethnic or cultural identity.

Buriat shamans attract visitors from as far away as Ulaanbaatar and Russian Buryatia. For people in Ulaanbaatar, the Dornod shamans, by virtue of residing in remote places, already have a reputation for more 'genuine' or 'skilful' shamanism compared with those closer to an urban environment. Buriat shamans in Mongolia are seen as the ones who preserve the real Buriat tradition, in contrast with more 'Russified' Buriats from Russian Buryatia. Since crossing the border between Russia and Mongolia is currently permitted in Dornod, there are visitors from Buryatia as well as from Russian Tuva. While the majority of the ethnic Buriats from Russian Buryatia, Chita, and Ulaanbaatar come to Dornod for specific shamanic practices (initiation of a person into shamanhood, finding a lineage *ongon*, etc.) and in order to obtain the 'correct' cultural traditions, the Khalkhas (the majority of Mongolians) and members of other ethnic groups in Mongolia come to Buriat shamans mostly for divination, for curing illnesses, or for ceremonies that ensure luck or remove curses and obstacles. However, this is not the only scenario: five decades of atheist teaching

and communist propaganda have changed people's attitude toward religious practices, at least on the surface. Ideas about shamans vary, depending on a person's background. Some people scorn shamans as backward, 'uncivilised' 'country people', while others fear them lest they 'put a curse' on anyone they happen to dislike.

Dagdan shaman constructs his power by combining shamanic practices with Buddhist ones, to suit his different clients. If a person from Ulaanbaatar is sceptical about shamanic ritual and does not appreciate it, the Dagdan shaman might recite a Buddhist sutra, which is more familiar to a city dweller. Shaman Dagdan enjoys his freedom to deploy both shamanic and Buddhist practices, since he has mastered the skills of both. My first visit to Dagdan shaman in 1996 happened to coincide with the three days and three nights of an elaborate *shamar* (initiation ceremony) for his apprentice, shaman Jigjid.

When the initiation ceremony was over, a woman who had joined us on our trip from Ulaanbaatar, asked Dagdan shaman to perform a ritual that would improve her chances of meeting a future husband. She was convinced that her 'door' to a husband had been accidentally closed, or that some previous jealous lover had put a curse on her future love life. She thought that she needed a ritual of *hanjin dallaga* ('beckoning forth a spouse'). The woman did not know the specifics of the ritual. All of us were surprised when we were invited to the Dagdan shaman's wooden log house, where he performed a small ritual, reciting a sutra known as *luujin tavih*. '*Luujin*' is a name for a sutra that has a magic spell to remove the barriers to a person's luck, including obstacles to meeting the right man.

For the ritual, the Dagdan shaman put on a headdress which Buriat shamans wear on their shoulders at the beginning of the ritual while they sing the evocations of the *ongons*, putting it on at the very moment they become possessed by the *ongons*. The headdress is a simple black hat with multiple black tassels of thin black strips hanging down over the face and covering the chin. The strips are so long that if a shaman is not moving much, it is almost impossible to see his face. The Dagdan shaman recited *luujin*, interrupting it with the occasional beating of a tiny two-sided drum. Two little wooden balls are attached to each side of the drum,⁶ so that when Dagdan shaman shakes it, the balls beat the drum, giving a very festive and ecstatic rhythm. Sometimes the Dagdan shaman also used a silver bell. The ceremony took about ten minutes. When I inquired as to what the ceremony was about, I received the reply that this was *ulanii yum?* or *bombin shashin* (the Bon religion). Dagdan shaman kept his shamanic attributes and his richly decorated ceremonial gown (*ih amiaa*) – used only during special rituals – in his house, just next to his elaborate Buddhist altar. I was curious to know whether the shamanic pantheons might not dislike the deities from other religious practices, but they seemed to be at peace with each other.

Shamar, Power and the Locals

I was informed that in the late 1980s the Dagedan shaman's prestige was very high in the community.

When the Dagedan shaman held his initiation ceremonies, even back when things were still very difficult [meaning during socialist times], many people in the *sum* presented him with a gift or a donation. Families would arrive to help him out with those labour consuming elaborate ceremonies. Everyone brought what he or she could: cheese, butter, live sheep, clothing, silk, or anything that would be useful for the ceremonies. People took it as if it was their own *shamar* (initiation as a shaman or advancement in the stages of the shamanic career). Local people were extremely happy for Dagedan. Even when the Dagedan shaman held initiations (*shamar*) for his apprentices the support and donations from the locals were still generous.

This comment was made during my first visit to the Dagedan shaman in 1996, when shaman Jigid's *shamar* was taking place. Jigid was one of Dagedan's most loyal and long-standing apprentices. The ceremony was almost entirely run by the relatives and children of the shaman Jigid, who came by truck from Nalakh, travelling some 800 km on a dirt road to reach the Dagedan shaman's home. There were a few of shaman Jigid's relatives who lived in Onon *sum*, but otherwise there was nobody from the *sum*. There were no followers of the Dagedan shaman – a striking contrast to the locals' support and active participation only few years previously. With no help from outsiders (including myself, a jeep driver and a couple of other people from Ulaanbaatar) the massive work – including cooking, preparation of the ritual woods, fireworks and ceremonial duties, not to mention all the financial expenses – had been entirely carried out by shaman Jigid's children and kin from the *sum*. Altogether there were about twenty people. At first, I thought this was the right number, but apparently, this kind of ritual requires more participation, and twenty people were not enough. Because the ceremony needed more people, shaman Jigid asked me to perform the role of a mother in the rituals. Both the symbolic father and the mother (me) were much younger than the Jigid shaman, who was in his late sixties. The role of mother had both advantages and disadvantages: later I had to be in a specific place at a specific time, and therefore I missed things going on in places apart from the actual performance; also, I could talk only to a certain number of people at that *shamar*. However, the position gave me the chance to learn the sequence and nuances of an extremely elaborate and long ritual.

In a vast green valley of echoing emptiness were a single log house and a few tiny wooden storage huts belonging to the Dagedan shaman and his family, along with the tents of shaman Jigid, my own tent, a single truck and a jeep. In this somewhat bleak setting, it was difficult to believe that only a few years ago, this valley would have echoed to the cacophony of voices for days and nights. Nevertheless, one could imagine fireworks at night and people singing and

dancing or just sitting around the fire and exchanging the latest news or their opinions about the latest *ongons*. One could imagine, throughout the day, children playing and crying, women cooking and joking, and men starting the engines of the trucks and pulling up the big containers to fetch water from a nearby stream, driving to the forest for wood and rocks, or to fetch herbs for ceremonies. People would constantly arrive and leave on horses and motorcyc-*shamar* used to be a big party or festival; it was an occasion when the division between work and fun blurred, and friendliness, good humour and laughter filled the air like opium.

This ceremony was totally different. Everyone was performing multiple tasks. Shaman Jigid often ran around overwhelmed and absent-minded, trying to cope; I often saw him raising his two hands in the air – a sign that he had forgotten to perform yet another task.

Since the late 1980s, the number of shamans has increased significantly. There are also a number of young shaman healers whose parents and ancestors were shamans, healers (*ulmahnai*) or bonesetters (*bariah*). Since every lineage has shamanic roots (*boö udam*), everyone has a right to find their *udam* and seek their own *ongons*. According to the local gossips, the Dagedan shaman disliked the fact that there were many other powerful shamans in the Dornod province besides himself. The people in the community stopped seeking Dagedan shaman's help as much as they did before; they had other shamans whom they could ask for help and service. The Dagedan shaman took it as a challenge or an affront to his power and prestige. Certain individuals did acknowledge that there were an increasing number of skilled and more powerful shamans in the *sum*.

The shift of the locals' respect away from Dagedan shaman has to do both with their knowledge about shamanic practice and with their personal relationship with shamans. Among the Buriats, knowledge of shamanism is easily available, and one does not have to become a shaman to know all about the rituals and mythologies. Since all the Buriats have *boö udam* (shamanic roots) and have shamans either as contemporaries or as ancestors, the shamans are a part of their social milieu. Buriat children are expected to know their *udams* and their *ongons*, and they are encouraged to participate in the shamanic rituals. The ritual knowledge, myths and anecdotes are retold on a daily basis and the children are exposed to shamanic knowledge from early childhood. This abundance of knowledge provides the locals with criteria they can use to assess the skills of the shamans. The only distinction between a shaman and an ordinary Buriat person appears to be whether one is able to *ongod ornulah*, which means, literally, to let the *ongon* enter into one's body and consciousness.

As briefly mentioned, Atkinson (1989: 219–225) argues that the shaman is dependent on his *audience*. She illustrates how 'the failure of an audience effectively to demonstrate their support for a shaman and his spirits familiars may put an end not only to the ritual occasion, but indeed to the shaman's life'

(p. 224). Importantly, Atkinson argues that 'Wana communities seek – and thus create – their shamans every bit as much as individuals strive to become shamans on their own' (p. 292). This fully applies to Buriat shamanism. People's knowledge and an individual shaman's 'disposition' (*zan arashin*) shape the career of a shaman as much as do individual shaman's skills and power and the historico-political circumstances.

It is believed that the 'power' of the shamans largely depends on the *ongon*, on the length of his shamanic roots and the number of *ongons* in his lineage (how many generations back the *ongons* can be traced); also on who was his teacher. While the teacher instructs his or her apprentice in arranging rituals, mastering the evocation songs and pointing out the nuances of ceremonies, the *ongons* actually perform the tasks, heal people, protect people from evil deities, remove curses and so on. The shaman is the person who has the 'license' to evoke the *ongon* and allow the *ongon* to act by lending him his own body and consciousness. As Humphrey noted in Siberian villages during the Soviet time, shamans were 'irresponsible, unexpected, and sly, since after all everything they say comes from the spirits, not from themselves' (1983: 409).

This negligent attitude of a shaman toward his practice can also be found among the Buriats in Onon *sum*. However, there is also another side to the situation – a notion of honour associated with the name of one's *udam*. The prestige of one's *udam* determines one's identity and provides an identification for a person. A shaman's success as a social being depends on the notion of honour and shame, which is largely characterised by the *udam*. Whether a person comes from a good *udam* or a bad *udam* is a serious consideration when the time comes for marriage, for making a business deal with a local wool trader, or for moving one's home. *Udam* is a powerful force: one has to protect it and constantly reassert one's connection to it.

Shamans are in a more vulnerable position than the rest of the people, since they depend on their *udam*'s *ongon* for help, service, and guidance – simply, for continuing to be a shaman. No shamans want to spoil their relationship with the *ongon*, to get 'sick' again, as they were before they became shamans, or to have other troubles in their lives. Although it is rare for *ongons* to trouble their own shamans, no *ongons* tolerate disrespect, negligence or abandonment.

Besides performing good deeds, shamans are expected to share with their *ongons* their food and drink, as well as a portion of their profits or gifts. Being in touch with *ongons* and pleasing them is the normal duty of a shaman. Shamans are in charge of protecting their families and kin from the *ongons* of their competitors or enemies and from evil spirits. Since the shamans summon *ongons* and ask them for protection and for other services, the shamans must be honourable enough to 'deserve' these services from their *ongons*. Depending on the skills of the shaman and the power of the *ongons*, the relationship between shaman and *ongon* varies. *Ongons* can be powerful and demanding toward the shaman, they can punish him or not 'come' to the shaman when he summons him

during the ceremonies. An *ongon* can fail the shaman by refusing his help, thereby adversely affecting the shaman's relationship with the locals. However, it is possible for a shaman to polish his skills to the extent that he becomes more powerful than his *ongon* (meaning that he becomes more powerful than the shaman who was in his lineage a long time ago) and thus, able to control it most of the time.

It appears that the temperament or disposition of a shaman and his relationship with the local community are crucial in determining a shaman's power and prestige. We therefore need to examine this social aspect in order to appreciate a shaman's ritual prerogatives. As Tambiah noted, 'We cannot in any absolute way separate ritual from non-ritual in the societies we study' (1979: 116). In the following example, I illustrate how the Dagdan shaman's *zan arashin* (disposition) turned the locals away from him.

In the summer of 1998, a couple of years after the *shamar* ceremony I described earlier, during my third visit to Onon *sum*, I learned that the relationship between the Dagdan shaman and his apprentice Jigid had become complicated. Jigid was an exceptionally loyal apprentice and had followed Dagdan shaman for more than thirty years, but he was not progressing in his rank, as would be expected. Shaman Jigid's eldest son told me that, every summer since the late 1980s, his father would come to the Dagdan shaman's place from Nalaikh (some 600km from Onon *sum*), and would spend a fortune to reach the next stage of initiation – over and over again, without much success. Fortunately, since the Jigid shaman had close relatives in Onon *sum*, he had some social and material support; moreover, he could rely on some measure of comfort after almost two days of weary travel on dirt roads. The Jigid shaman was almost the same age as his teacher, the Dagdan shaman, but they were far apart in status and on the hierarchical ladder. There were rumours among the locals that Dagdan shaman and Jigid were not compatible as a teacher and apprentice, or that Dagdan shaman was envious of Jigid because he was about to become a more powerful shaman than himself.

In the spring of 1998, shaman Jigid came for his *shamar* ceremony of initiation to the next stage. The Dagdan shaman had gone to a neighbouring town for an indefinite length of time. Since his teacher was not at home, Jigid went to another shaman – Dagdan's former apprentice – and 'got' the necessary 'knowledge' he needed in order to obtain the next rank. About the time shaman Jigid was ready to depart for home, his teacher shaman Dagdan returned. Shaman Jigid decided to pay him a visit. When shaman Jigid and his son entered Dagdan shaman's home, Dagdan shaman shouted at them for going to the 'shaman who did not know the real shamanic rules and violated the pristine and true traditions of shamanism by making it easy and superficial'; he cursed them and ordered them to leave his house. Shaman Jigid, in great distress, asked forgiveness from his teacher and handed him gifts, including bottled alcohol and a highly treasured piece of silk. This still did not calm the fury of his teacher and

when Shaman Jigid was leaving, he saw his teacher go outside and pour the alcohol on the ground. Shaman Jigid took this as a sign of hostility, an insult and a ritual intended to block his luck and fortune. It was also a sign that their relationship was severed.

According to the local people, the Dagdan shaman abused people's respect, made excessive demands and 'tried to make slaves out of his apprentices'. Once, he ordered his former apprentice to bow down in front of him and ask forgiveness because the latter had cut up the meat after slaughtering a sheep without seeking Dagdan shaman's instructions.

Only a few years ago, many people would voluntarily help Dagdan shaman with his housework and with taking care of his ever-increasing number of animals. These days, most of the people in the community have turned away from him; he has only two local families working for him, and not on a voluntary basis, but in exchange for food and other items. These two families are poor and have only a small number of their own animals. This arrangement indicates the (re)emergence of the 'new nomadic economy' based on patron-client relationship, which very much resembles the pre-socialist and pre-state-farm arrangement. The most important and interesting aspect of this case is that the Dagdan shaman obtained his material wealth, not through economic production or by inheritance, but through creating and legitimising his cultural capital in the form of shamanic attributes and rules. Then, he was able to convert this cultural capital into material capital. The historical circumstances, the locals' demand for shamanic practices, and the Dagdan shaman's performance increased his chances of obtaining both material gains and social capital in the form of prestige. However, as we have seen, the Dagdan shaman lost the local's respect as quickly and easily as he had gained it, not so long ago. The Dagdan shaman's trajectory of prestige and power has been uneven. A shaman's position in a community is always questioned, and it depends as much on his reputation as a social being as on his shamanic skills.

This is not the end of the story. Surprisingly, when prestige and power are no longer available from the locals, the shaman Dagdan has procured them from other parts of Dornod, and even from as far away as Ulaanbaatar. When the Dagdan shaman sensed that he was losing prestige in his *sum*, he made an attempt to bring all the local shamans together under his control. He started building a Buddhist *daganz* (shrine). He hoped he could gather all the shamans and they would shamanise together 'for the wellbeing of the entire community'. No one joined him in his project, making the excuse that their spirits 'do not like to be with the spirits of others'. Undaunted, the Dagdan shaman hired local people to work on the *daganz* in the name of religion and preservation of their cultural heritage. The workers were compensated with a goat or some food items. But (1979: 37) has argued that the building of splendid palaces and temples was seen as one of the important legitimating acts of kings in Thai and other southeastern

societies. It is clear that the construction of this *daganz* was the Dagdan shaman's attempt at self-legitimation, to regain his power and prestige.

Despite the fact that the Dagdan shaman's reputation has been diminishing in his own community, outside of it his popularity and prestige have, in fact, been increasing. He is an exceptionally talented performer, as people admit: he gets into a trance very easily; his practices are always impressive and theatrical and his shamanic attributes and costume are colourful and elaborate. He has a wonderful voice, and his singing is breathtakingly beautiful. People from different communities will travel a long way to watch his performance and the shaman candidates – those people who claim to be possessed by spirits – strive to become his apprentices. During the summer seasons the Dagdan shaman leads initiation ceremonies for visitors from the neighbouring *sums* and provinces almost non-stop. It is important to note that few of Onon *sum*'s people attend his ceremonies. The Dagdan shaman's audience and clients now consist almost entirely of people outside of his community. While the Buddhist shrine attracted outside people's attention and curiosity, the distance of Onon *sum* from other places, and especially from Ulaanbaatar, favoured the popularity of the Dagdan shaman in Ulaanbaatar. The more 'remote', and 'uncivilised' the place, the more 'genuine' and 'powerful' the shaman is considered. Thus, distance, aesthetics of performance, the 'good deeds' of building a shrine and the period of 'shamanic revival' have constituted a new source for the Dagdan shaman's power and prestige. This time it comes from outside his own community, and the people from afar have no concerns about the Dagdan shaman's disposition or local shamanic politics. The relationship between the visitors and the shaman is entirely different from the shaman's relationship with the locals; nevertheless, it supplies him with prestige. Shamanic practices are local and at the same time stretch beyond the local.

While I was staying with the Dagdan shaman during my second visit, the family and relatives – about 80 people – of a young shaman arrived from the neighbouring *sum*. The majority were the Dagdan shaman's distant kin, but many of them were unrelated. Following the Buriat-Mongolian custom, the Dagdan shaman greeted all the people one by one, crossing hands and asking after their wellbeing. Everyone presented him a gift. Different colours of silk clothes, bed-spreads, carpets, brick teas piled up in every corner of the Dagdan shaman's house. Many of the people also presented gifts to the Dagdan shaman's wife. My driver jokingly noted that the Dagdan shaman's house had become like a moderate size boutique in the centre of the province. Moreover, the group which came to organise the initiation ceremony brought a big Russian truck loaded with sheep, several bags of flour and rice (about 120 pounds each), about 50 bottles of distilled milk alcohol, and a large container of fermented mare's milk. Plus they brought sacks of fresh and dried cheese, bread, butter and candies neatly packed in wooden trunks. The feast continued for about a week, as

opposed to the usual three days. During that time the Dagedan shaman was constantly offered the best food and the best drinks. At that time I saw Dagedan shaman as kind, knowledgeable, very well organised and a devoted leader of the ceremony.

All the arrangements of the initiation ceremony were followed according to his orders. This time, the Dagedan shaman ordered the cutting of 32 birch trees, of the same height and only from the western side of the mountains to the north of his home. He wanted the *davtsags* (ornaments that look like little flags) on the trees to be made specifically of yellow fabric, and the figures on them had to be drawn with black and red pencils. One of the rituals required the figure of a sheep to be made from dough (*balin*). Almost everyone in the tent had to demonstrate his or her artistic talent in modelling the sheep. The Dagedan shaman threatened not to perform the ritual, if the figure did not look like a real sheep.

Along with the young shaman there were seven 'new' shamans, who came to speak to the Dagedan shaman and ask his advice concerning their practice. The shamans would sit in a circle and Dagedan shaman taught them the vocabulary for chanting the *Hohodei* - the spirit of the holy mountain in the province. He also taught them how to evoke *Marjiaalai* - one of the ancestral spirits which had become popular in the shamanic pantheon - along with many others. Despite local accusations and criticisms that he was an arrogant and harsh man, the Dagedan shaman was polite and welcoming toward me as an ethnographer.

Initiation ceremonies and the number of apprentices ensure the prestige and define the power of shamans. My study of this local community suggests that besides vying with each other in magic and ceremonial skills, some of the shamans compete by attracting a greater number of apprentices and clients. The Dagedan shaman went even further. He could produce cultural capital - his complex and meticulous ceremonial rules, his standards for expensive and intricately made costumes and attributes, and his theatrical performance - that helped him to acquire political and material capital.

The ritual rules of the Buriat *shonar* are complex to start with. The Dagedan shaman makes them even more complicated and mysterious by taking long breaks, prolonging the time for preparation and directing the start and finish of the ceremonies. His demands from the new apprentices are strict and, according to comments from the locals, are sometimes 'unreasonable'. He shamanises as he pleases and the rest of the group is expected to follow him. The process of reviving past traditions of ritual in a new context, following the extensive and redundant structure of the ritual, and its over-elaboration and over-prolongation is similar to what Tambiah calls *ritual involution* (1979:149). I have no doubt that this exercise is a form of ritual involution by the Dagedan shaman, involving the creation of a form of symbolic capital as well as the exercise of power.

This ritual involution is also evident in the attributes of the shaman. The Dagedan shaman's *zaarin* costume includes a big shiny crown, which closely resembles the crown of the last Mongol Emperor, Bogd Khan; a flowing silk

throw; and a richly embroidered robe. The Dagedan shaman is very proud of the *zaarin* costume, which he wears when he has clients or guests at times other than during the actual rituals. It serves as a status-marker: by wearing that outfit, the Dagedan shaman distinguishes himself from other shamans, and especially from the younger ones and his apprentices. The Dagedan shaman has another elaborate costume (*ih amitai*) for shamanic performances. As far as I can tell, that costume is a genuine work of art. It is made of white deerskin, decorated with pieces of metal in the shape of human skeletons and body parts (ribs; limbs; even heart, kidney and stomach), and metal figures of all the animals of the forest and grassland (pigs, bears, birds etc.). It also carries further metallic additions in the form of mirrors, little bells, and pendants, and it weighs about 140 pounds. No outsider or woman is supposed to touch it. In addition to the main gown, there is also an apron, snake-shaped motifs for the shoulders, belts, a throw, drum with drumstick, and other musical instruments which cannot be described in detail here. The seamstress who made most of the *ih amitai* and especially the intricate ornaments, confided in me that sewing the Dagedan shaman's attributes was a challenge, that the Dagedan shaman's demands were most extravagant, and that he was meticulous about every detail of the attributes.

Decorations of a shaman's costume vary depending on the individual, on his rank, his ethnic or tribal identity and so on. Among the Buriats of Dornod the costume (*ih amitai*) is an independent object of worship and respect. *Ih amitai* is considered more powerful than the shaman who owns it. It is a sacred object, often discreetly arranged in an altar-like way in the most respected part of the house. Some shamans use a convenient closed box to hold their *ih amitai*. They occasionally open the doors of the *ih amitai* box for rituals and offerings. It is considered a great honour if a shaman opens the doors for someone to look at and touch the *ih amitai*. Since it is treated almost like an altar, the shamans I know place *zul* (butter candles) in front of the *ih amitai* and make food and drink offerings. Caroline Humphrey (1995: 151) found that, in some Mongolian groups, the shaman's gown depicts a 'landscape'. The costume of a Daur shaman, for example, represents a fortified city, an extravaganza of symbolic openings and closures to the world. The self-representation of the shamans varies greatly. In her study of Daur shamans, Humphrey (1996: 202) notes that 'the symbolism of the shaman's costume was an active meta-statement, referring not just to the past but to the acknowledgment of "the past" as objectified, a source of power. Making such a costume for their shaman the people placed him or her in a world-conquering time-machine'. In the case of Dagedan shaman's *ih amitai*, its symbolic meaning is accompanied by his desire to attract the attention of his audience and apprentices.

In Onon *sun* of Dornod, the complexity of a shaman's costume does not necessarily reflect his or her power and its efficacy as understood by the locals. The notion of a shaman's power among the Buriats there is tightly bound up with local standards of moral disposition as a member of the community. A shaman

might pass his *shamar* and obtain the next rank and title; he might have the most impressive costume and be one of the quickest in *ongon oruulah* (spirit possession); but this would not necessarily guarantee him a wide supportive audience or the overall approval of the community. To be acknowledged as a *shaman*, the shaman has to meet the local standards of moral disposition that makes him a respected member of the community. As I mentioned earlier, the Buriats view contemporary shamans through the lens of the heroic and altruistic shamans with magic power, as depicted in myths and oral histories.

While there are number of shamans in Onon *sum* who are regarded as extremely powerful, even more powerful than the Dagedan shaman, the Dagedan shaman had by far the most impressive costume. In fact, a particularly skilled shaman, Lhamjav – who was in his sixties, and also a well-known healer – had not had a shamanic gown all his life. In the summer of 1997 Lhamjav was to hold his first *shamar*. His daughters were making him his first shamanic gown. While the family found a very skilled, high-ranking blacksmith to make the metal parts of the gown, the garment itself was made of a dark brown silk – a material that does not by any means resemble a white deerskin. Despite his neglect of impressive shamanic attributes, he had many people visiting him, both from the locality and from beyond. He did not have a good singing voice, yet he was certainly acknowledged and respected by the *sum* people.

By having the most exquisite and expensive costume, by making his rituals complicated and challenging, the Dagedan shaman attempts to convince people that he is the only one who knows the 'real shamanic tradition'. However, I have tried to illustrate that the relationship between the symbolic power of a shaman and his prestige in a community is by no means direct. The career of a shaman depends on multiple sources including historical circumstances, local constructions of knowledge and power, social relationships, the individual shaman himself, and the local norms of moral disposition. Characteristics such as *modesty, kindness, unpretentiousness, dignity* are often brought up in conversations about other people, and especially shamans. The importance of local people's knowledge and beliefs should be emphasised. The dynamic is as follows: while the locals' knowledge about shamans, *ongons*, symbols, and myths is important for a shaman in gathering an audience and attract apprentices, it also serves as a powerful source for the locals to assess and control the shaman's power construction. The production of symbolic capital in a form of 'ritual involution', revival of an intricate tradition of costumes, and building of shrines, does not necessarily get transformed into political power. The local community seeks and finds a shaman for itself, as much as a shaman builds his career and 'keeps his charisma fresh' (Atkinson, 1989: 316) for the locals. A shaman's prestige and power is fluid, temporal and situational. It derives from different groups of people and different areas, depending on the specific social context.

NOTES

The paper is based on research carried out in Dornod, Mongolia throughout the summers of 1996-1998. The research in 1996 was supported by a summer travel grant from the Committee on Inner Asian and Altaic Studies, Harvard University, that of 1997 was conducted during my non-funded visit to Mongolia and that of 1998 was funded by Andrew Mellon funding for summer research in 1998 from the Department of Anthropology, Harvard University. I want to thank Kim Gutchow for reading an earlier version of this paper and for the memorable discussions afterwards. I would also like to thank Urdyn E. Bulag, who made most generous and insightful comments on various drafts of the paper. His support and encouragement were helpful throughout the entire writing process. The conclusions and opinions stated in the paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the agencies or individuals listed above. My heartfelt thanks go to my friends in Dornod and Nalakh for their kindness and good humour, which helped to make my fieldwork a truly enjoyable experience. My last and deepest gratitude is to my mother, Buyandelger Mengeiyin, who accompanied me on all my fieldwork trips and enthusiastically supported my research. A journalist and a photographer, she met my future informants in 1996 during the International Balkal Symposium on Shamanism in Buryatia, and then arranged my first trip to Dornod, introducing me into this wonderful world of shamans.

¹ Registered mail to the following address for June 1999 – September 2000: P.O.B. 44-517, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

² *Kandilar nauk* is an academic degree in Russia or the Former Soviet Union.

³ S. Dulam distinguishes five types of shamanic practices among the Mongols: Khalkha, Övörjög, Darkhat, Uygur-Uraianhai and Buriat (S. Dulam 1992). Among Darkhats so-called 'shamanic illness' is the 'reason' for a person to become initiated into a shaman (personal communication).

⁴ *Sum* is a Mongolian county-level administrative unit, consisting from 2,500 to 3,000 people.

⁵ According to S. Dulam, the Darkhats are people more of Turkic origin than Mongolian (personal communication).

⁶ For more information about this type of drum see Heisig (1980: 21). According to Heisig this type of drum is similar to the drums of the Hisingan-Tungus and Manchu shamans. Humphrey notes that 'the small, two-sided drum with wooden balls and the bell are both items for Buddhist ritual, though also used by "shaman-like" Buddhist practitioners in Inner Mongolia' (personal communication).

⁷ *Ulaani yum* refers to the Red Hat sect of Buddhism, that branch of the Tibetan Tantric tradition which had the greatest influence on Bonism (Conze 1975 [1951]: 201). According to Heisig (1980: 8) the sixteenth century Chinese and Mongolian sources note that there were remains and monastic settlements of the unreformed *nying ma pa* (the so-called 'Red Hat sect') in northern Mongolia.

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