

Dealing with uncertainty:

Shamans, marginal capitalism, and the remaking of history in postsocialist Mongolia

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the proliferation of previously suppressed shamanic practices among ethnic Buryats in Mongolia after the collapse of socialism in 1990. Contrary to the Buryats' expectation that shamanism would solve the uncertainties brought about by the market economy, it has created additional spiritual uncertainties. As skeptical Buryats repeatedly propitiate their angry origin spirits to alleviate the causes of their misfortunes, they reconstruct their history, which was suppressed by state socialism. The Buryats make their current calamities meaningful by placing them within the shifting history of their tragic past. The sense of uncertainty, fear, and disillusionment experienced by the Buryats also characterizes daily life in places other than Mongolia. This study reflects broader anthropological concerns about the emergence of new cultural spaces and practices in former socialist and preindustrial societies undergoing transitions to market economies. [*shamanism, market, state, postsocialism, uncertainty, Mongolia, Buryats, violence*]

More than 15 years have passed since the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and Mongolia.¹ Most people in these regions have been subjected to unexpected, contradictory, and often confusing transformations because of the “unmaking” (Humphrey 2002) of socialism and the simultaneous arrival of a market economy and implementation of neoliberal economic reforms. Because the economic transformations have been the most visible and pertinent aspects of the transitions to postsocialism, a rich body of work has discussed the restructuring of property and privatization, state institutions, and the rethinking of political categories (Berdahl 1999; Borneman 1992, 1998; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Caldwell 2004; Humphrey 2002; Verdery 1996). Scholars elsewhere have also noted that the feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and anxiety that result from the dangerous volatility, disorder, and opaqueness of the market are being articulated through the medium of popular religion, shamanism, witchcraft, and spirit possession (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Kendall 2003; Moore and Sanders 2001; Weller 1994).

In Mongolia, among ethnic Buryats, previously suppressed shamanic practices have proliferated, at least in part as a means of dealing with the anxieties and uncertainties brought about by the collapse of socialism and the incipient market economy. The Buryats attribute their current misfortunes to their origin spirits (*ug garval*), who have returned to seek revenge against their descendants for abandoning them during the socialist state's suppression of religion.² Skeptical about the powers of newly emerged shamans after decades of state disruption of the shamanic tradition, the Buryats sponsor endless rituals in search of more powerful shamans and authentic origin spirits. While appeasing the angry origin spirits in the hope of alleviating the causes of their misfortunes, the Buryats accumulate memories of their tragic past, silenced by state socialism. Almost inadvertently, the shifting history of the Buryats reemerges as an outcome of the search to make misfortunes meaningful.

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Anthropologists Michael Taussig (1980), Aihwa Ong (1987), Lesley Sharp (1993), Robert Weller (1994), and others have shown that in places with incipient capitalism, the new conditions have been interpreted through local beliefs and symbols before they have been accepted as natural. In the Buryat case, the arrival of vengeful spirits seeking propitiation has been a creative way of dealing with the calamities bred by the changed economy. But the same angry spirits also carry the history that the state violently suppressed during socialism. Through possession by their origin spirits, Buryat shamans turn into metaphoric condensations of disrupted ancestral genealogies and living nodes of oral history. They “bear their histories” (Lambek 2002) against the official account constructed by the socialist state. By sponsoring shamanic rituals, the Buryats accumulate the dispersed stories of their past, develop a sense of place of their ancestral lands, and encounter the spirits of the victims of purges during socialism. Through shamanism, the Buryats creatively link their current misfortunes with historical oppression. It is only the formulation of Buryat spiritual and social history that makes their present misfortunes meaningful to them.

The remaking of histories since the collapse of socialism in Europe and parts of Asia has taken diverse cultural forms, for example, autobiographies (Borneman 1996, 1998), mythmaking and narratives (Humphrey 2002, 2003), secret memories (Watson 1994), and rearticulation of histories (Kaplonski 1999, 2004). The rearticulation of Buryat history through shamanism is unique because it takes place almost inadvertently. Those who consult shamans believe that the propitiation of their angry origin spirits will alleviate the causes of their misfortunes, but they are also skeptical about the agency of shamans. Magnified because of the recent marketization of shamanic practices and the socialist state’s rupture of the tradition of shamanism, the Buryats’ skepticism fuels their search for ever more powerful shamans, who can summon more authentic spirits. This search leads to the rearticulation of their histories.

Recent research on shamanic practices in the post-Soviet world shows their resilience to persecution under socialism and their diverse and creative forms of resurgence after the collapse of socialist states (Balzer 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Humphrey 1983, 1999a, 1999b; Vitebsky 1995, 2001, 2005). In this article, I attend to the paradox created by the socialist state’s disruption of shamanic tradition. The more the Buryats believe in the loss of that tradition during socialism, the more shamanic rituals they generate. Instead of alleviating the economic anxieties brought about by the market economy, shamans aggravate those anxieties by answering people’s practical request for aid in survival with history from the distant past.

My argument is based on 18 months of ethnographic research in 1996–2000, during which I lived and traveled with the families of male and female shamans, their clients, and audiences, both among nomads in the countryside and

among residents of the administrative center of Bayan-Uul district of Dornod province. Mostly descendants of migrants from Russian Buryatia who emigrated to Mongolia hoping to escape the Russian Bolshevik revolution and the subsequent civil war, the Buryats were caught by Soviet socialism, which spilled over to Mongolia in the 1920s. Like other Mongols, they endured the state violence that was imposed by Josef Stalin on Mongolia in 1937–40, the subsequent forced collectivization and modernization, and the collapse of socialism and the arrival of a market economy in the 1990s.

Today, the origin spirits of the Buryats in Dornod province reside on the island of Oikhon in Lake Baikal, on the Aga steppes, and in Ul’han on the Russian side of the Mongolian border. The border between Russia and Mongolia was established not by the local population but by the colonial governments of Russia and China (the Qing Dynasty) through the 1729 Treaty of Nerchinsk. The border divided the Buryats among Russia, China, and Mongolia.³ Buryat shamanic practices have been conditioned by their resistance to Russian colonialism and Enlightenment projects, Christian missionaries from the west, and 17th-century Buddhist missionaries from the south. Along with shamanism, today the Buryats of Mongolia also practice Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism)⁴—the religion of most Mongols (including the politically dominant majority Khalhas). Shamanism is one of the hallmarks of Buryat ethnic identity, whereas Buddhism is a sign of belonging to the nation-state. The Buryats maintain the two practices in strict separation—shamanism is based on the powers of origin spirits, whereas Buddhism involves the worship of deities. They do not substitute for each other. The socialist state persecuted both shamans and lamas. Since the collapse of the state, the origin spirits have behaved particularly fiercely because of their neglect by their descendants.

In the following sections, I discuss the economic anxiety that has pushed the Buryats to seek help from shamans to propitiate the spirits that have returned from suppression. I consider how the socialist disruption of shamanism and suspicion of the agency of shamans create additional spiritual uncertainties. I then present individual accounts exemplifying how dealing with economic anxieties and spiritual uncertainties through shamanism has led to rearticulation of Buryats’ histories.

Economic anxiety: From socialism to “shock therapy”

The extent of the devastation and the feeling of loss and anxiety that the Mongols have experienced since the collapse of socialism can be comprehended only against the backdrop of the relative slowness (even stillness), tranquility, and security of everyday economic life during socialism.⁵ The socialist state in Mongolia oversaw an economy based on overall scarcity, yet it eliminated starvation, homelessness, and

illiteracy and succeeded in preventing major outbreaks of epidemic illnesses. It was a “paternalistic” entity (Verdery 1996) that guaranteed jobs, access to basic goods, health care, and pensions. Organizing state and collective farms in rural areas was one way the state sheltered and controlled the population.⁶ The district of Bayan-Uul was organized around one of the country’s largest and most prosperous state farms, located on the northeastern border with Russia. It provided salaries, subsidies, and support by the state. Despite all its shortcomings, the socialist state largely succeeded in creating a sense of safety and support through propaganda and tangible economic structures.

As is well known today, such a sense of security existed only because the socialist state concealed its economic fragility.⁷ The state hid from ordinary citizens its overstretched budget, dysfunctional economy, and Mongolia’s debt to the Soviet Union, which reached \$10 billion between 1949 and 1990.⁸ In the second half of the 20th century, Mongolia’s economy was heavily dependent on the Soviet Union. Mongolia’s main exports were minerals (uranium and copper) and meat and other livestock products to the Soviet Union. In return, Mongolia received gas, oil, machinery, equipment, and consumer goods. Politically, Mongolia followed the Soviet Union and severed its relationship with China after the Sino–Soviet split in the late 1960s. Mongolia was a Soviet buffer zone and a window to the rest of Asia; Soviet military troops were stationed in Mongolia until Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew them in 1986.

Mongolia’s struggle to shift to democracy and a free market, which was coupled with the movement to free its economy from the Soviet Union, began in late 1989. With continuous mass demonstrations and the organization of multiple political parties, peaceful democratic reforms took hold in Mongolia. The country held its first democratic elections in July 1990, preceding the democratic reforms in the Soviet Union by almost two years. The Soviet Union openly disapproved of such moves. In August 1990, the Soviet Union began cutting back on its trade and barter relations with Mongolia. It terminated its supply of gas and mining equipment to Mongolia and stopped buying Mongolian meat. Subsequently, the KGB established an embargo on Mongolian goods, thus, cutting the country off from all economic resources. A few months later, because of its own internal economic crises, the Soviet Union terminated international aid and loans to all its recipient countries. Mongolia turned to its emergency resources of flour and meat and distributed them to the population through rations, and the country’s leaders traveled abroad to solicit aid and loans from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the IMF, Japan, the United States, Germany, and other sources.⁹

Like the rest of Mongolia, the state farm in Bayan-Uul began experiencing shortages of gas and cash, and gradually it stopped operating. With the collapse of socialism and the termination of Soviet subsidies, the neoliberalized Mongo-

lian government had rapidly privatized the state enterprises as part of an economic policy known as “shock therapy.”¹⁰ On December 10, 1993, the Bayan-Uul state farm was dismantled, and its livestock was distributed to the herders and workers. Bayan-Uul was impoverished almost overnight, largely because the state farm, although rich in agricultural and industrial units, was poor in livestock. During livestock distribution, each person received, on average, five sheep, and every fourth person in a family received one head of cattle. The situation was slightly better in the neighboring, formerly less wealthy, districts where the economy had been based purely on pastoral nomadism; they had more livestock per capita for distribution.

The agricultural and industrial units of the state farm in Bayan-Uul were turned into 11 separate private enterprises, including a hotel, a vegetable farm, a haymaking farm, and several livestock farms, among others. Most quickly went bankrupt because of inflation, lack of management experience, dissolving infrastructure, and lack of bank loans.¹¹ By the spring of 1994, most former workers had eaten or sold their livestock. Disastrous fires, which lasted for several months in the spring and summer of 1995, exacerbated the poverty. Bayan-Uul’s livestock count decreased from more than 60,000 head in 1993 to 28,000 head by 1999 (Galsan 1994). One of the wealthiest districts during socialism, Bayan-Uul became the poorest under the market economy. In 2000, suicide was uncommon in the district, but by 2006, at least two people per month took their lives.

Many Buryats and ordinary Mongols who lived through socialism had not expected that the transition from socialism to a market economy would actually mean the collapse of the state. They were unprepared to deal with the dissolution of state enterprises without any (at least short-term) governmental support during the shift to the new system. The disappearance of a strong, omnipresent, and ordered state was shocking. The early 1990s were characterized as a time of social anxiety (*niigmin buhimdal*), which was largely an outgrowth of the socialist state’s failed promises. To most people it became clear that there was no way back to socialism, and, unlike other parts of the world where people resisted the market economy, the Mongols embraced the new system. At least in Bayan-Uul, many tried to take advantage of every opportunity they could find in the market economy, which they saw as salvation from failed socialism.

Beating against an unknown system

Buryats expected that the market economy (*zah zeel*) would be a system in which individual pastoralists would carry out economic transactions involving their privately owned livestock.¹² In addition to a physical market—a space with stalls and shops for buyers and sellers—for marginalized Buryats, the market economy promised roads, transportation, and access to gas, information about inflation, prices,

and other resources. Instead of the expected norms and tangible structures, however, the Buryats, like most Mongols, encountered chaos and “disorder” (Humphrey 1999b). Some people in Bayan-Uul told me that they felt cut off from the rest of the world and they felt the market existed only in the city. Those who traveled extensively and engaged in economic activities also experienced a weird “magicality” of the market economy; it was “there, and yet somehow it [did] not operate as theory predicts” (Humphrey 2002:xx).

The people of Bayan-Uul took great personal risks by committing their resources to survive in the market economy. They made the most of the opportunities available to them and did what was expected of them in the new system, producing and trading goods and services. These actions, however, rarely yielded profit. The Buryats felt that they had fallen through the cracks between the now-dissolved old system and the not-yet-established new one. Most fledgling traders faced multiple obstacles in Mongolia, for example, inflation that reached 400 percent in the early 1990s, lack of loans, long travel distances, and poor infrastructure. Outside Mongolia, mostly in China and Russia, they encountered language barriers, struggled to deal with foreign customs and laws, and had insufficient networks. Because of such obstacles, which led to losses, chronic uncertainty, and confusion, the term *market economy* came to imply insecurity, hardships, competition, shortages, instability, and even danger and fear.

Unlike some other places, where the local economies prior to the arrival of capitalism had been relatively orderly, for example, in Zambia (Ferguson 1999) and in Botswana (Peters 1994), in Mongolia, socialism had already produced a failed economy prior to the arrival of the market economy. The socialist state, however, disguised its losses from the populace. In particular, agriculture, including wheat harvesting, had proven to be unprofitable for climatic, economic, and geographic reasons. Yet the losses of agriculture had been fixed with Soviet subsidies, and socialist media propagated the illusion of success.¹³ When socialism collapsed, in addition to the difficulties brought about by the market economy, the populace had to deal with the repercussions of state socialism, in particular, with the state’s withholding of information about losses and gains.¹⁴ For example, in the early 1990s, when Mongolian government officials were looking for a completely new way to run the economy, in the rural areas, many individuals, lacking information, still believed that wheat farming was the most profitable business.¹⁵ Some had invested their last remaining resources in recovering overgrown wheat fields and in other agricultural endeavors without knowing that such activities were doomed to fail regardless of their efforts.

The transition from socialism to a market economy was more difficult in Mongolia than elsewhere. Isolated, landlocked, with a small population, poor infrastructure, and unrevealed (at that time) natural resources, Mongolia was

economically weaker than former socialist countries in Eastern Europe. The recovery from the collapse of socialism was slow, and the vast majority of the population was doomed to extreme impoverishment for years.

During my stay there in 1996–2000, Bayan-Uul was a ghost town left to decay amid the ruins of the state farm (see Figure 1). A lifeless giant power station, carcasses of tractors and trucks, and log houses with broken windows were the dominant points of scenery. People were hanging on to life, subsisting on and selling milk from a cow or drawing a minuscule pension from the state. Acute impoverishment had been turned into normality, illnesses and accidents were widespread, and despair and anger dominated the place. Shamanic practices among ethnic Buryats proliferated in the context of ongoing economic impoverishment, failed expectations of democracy, disbelief in the government, and intracommunity hostility. As the sense of anxiety, fear, and panic mounted, fueled by events that did not necessarily make sense to Buryats, shamanic practices seemed to offer an explanation for poverty and other misfortunes.

From client to shaman: Attempts to keep misfortunes at bay

The major “diagnosis” shamans give for misfortunes is that Buryat origin spirits abandoned during socialism went awry without descendants’ worship. Shamans help to deal with the angry spirits by performing rituals of propitiation. They track down and locate the roaming spirits through divination, evoke them in the ritual arena, and then become possessed by them, thus, allowing the spirits and their descendants to converse (see Figure 2). Although individual spirits’ disposition, speech, and demands differed, all of the ones I knew acted out anger and bitterness for abandonment. Some spirits were deliberately malicious toward people who were on the brink of starvation (“How *good* have your lives been so far?”). Others cried and complained (“You denied my existence, while I hovered above you as a black crow”). Almost all of them threatened to inflict more misfortunes and pain in the future (“I will send you to the wilderness, rock beds are waiting for you”). After a gulp of tea, a libation, and a promise from descendants to remember and worship them, the spirits became less violent. If the audience succeeded in pleasing them, the spirits promised to stop hurting and to start helping their descendants. In return, the spirits requested the descendants to sponsor further rituals.

Skepticism toward shamans’ abilities and motives drives people to seek additional shamans for alternative answers. By sponsoring additional rituals for the origin spirits, a family hopes to keep misfortunes at bay. As misfortunes continue in the impoverished countryside, shamans find additional spirits who were abandoned through the generations and who are also responsible for the destinies of family members. These spirits also request rituals of



Figure 1. View of Bayan-Uul from a distance. Photo by Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn.

propitiation. The propitiation implies that the family members commit to worshipping the spirit in perpetuity. Once a spirit is accepted into a family's pantheon of origin spirits, it cannot be "dropped" or made to "depart," as, without propitiation, it will harm the descendants. Although families hope that propitiating additional spirits will alleviate the causes of their misfortunes, they are also aware that each new spirit is an economic burden and an emotional disturbance and that it can potentially demand a family member be initiated as a shaman. Eventually, as the number of spirits increases (but the misfortunes continue), the spirits nominate a family member to be initiated as a shaman to serve them.

A request to initiate a family member as a shaman is a source of both great anxiety and hope. Younger people often refuse to be initiated as shamans, but because the most unfortunate men and women are nominated, most eventually move toward initiation. To become a full-fledged shaman, a neophyte shaman must stage *shanars*—degree-elevating ceremonies (13 for men and 7 for women) within an interval of two to three years. Ideally, becoming a shaman takes a decade, but depending on individuals' resources, support, and abilities, the process can take longer or be completed sooner.

Both the preparations and the staging of *shanars* are time-consuming, laborious, and expensive endeavors. A neophyte shaman must find a teacher, acquire paraphernalia (22 items, ranging from coral bracelets and mirrors to a highly elaborate antelope-skin gown covered with metal representations of human skeletons, animals, and trees), and find resources to attract an audience. *Shanars* are led by the shaman's teacher, who connects the neophyte with his or her origin spirits. The neophyte's goal is to become possessed by the origin spirits. Enlivened by a specific origin spirit, each item of paraphernalia adds a layer of power to and strengthens the protection of a new shaman. Although Buryat shamanic practice is gender egalitarian—male and female shamans can achieve equal powers and they provide the same services—because of the overall patriarchal and patrilocal structure of Buryat culture, female shamans tend to fall behind male shamans in the taxing quest for power (Buyandelgeriyn 2004).

Many Buryats criticize individuals who are initiated as shamans for seeking an opportunity to make money from others' misfortunes. I followed many shamans in their endeavors to stage *shanars*, to summon an audience, and to acquire paraphernalia. At least in Bayan-Uul, without other



Figure 2. Shamanic ritual of tracing an origin spirit. Photo by Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn.

resources, most shamans cannot support themselves or a family through ritual practice alone. Gifts to the spirits and shaman during rituals that do not include a sheep sacrifice are minuscule (a prayer scarf, four yards of cloth, or cash to buy a loaf of bread), and the shanars can be expensive. Successful shamans are usually men who had a good economic basis, with a home, a family to support, and a decent-sized herd of livestock, prior to initiation. Yet almost every family I met while living in Bayan-Uul had a member who had been initiated as a shaman. The motives for becoming a shaman are multiple and lie beyond the hope for economic profits. They are embedded in a sense of fear, uncertainty, and despair and in an ongoing attempt to control the flow of misfortunes. Shamans live with frustrations, as, in impoverished and isolated Bayan-Uul, attracting an audience that can provide sufficient gifts is tricky.

Just as shamanic clients believe in keeping the misfortunes at bay by staging yet another ritual and by worshipping yet another spirit, shamans hope that they eventually will gain powers to control calamities by acquiring yet another origin spirit in their pantheon, by performing their next sha-

nar, by finding the right teacher, or by completing acquisition of their paraphernalia. Both clients and shamans suspend their disbelief in cases of failure. In fact, failed rituals lead clients to seek ever more powerful shamans, and, often indirectly, they push shamans to hurry up the ladder in the quest for shamanic power. If clients attribute the continuation of their misfortunes to shamans' failed rituals, shamans regard the calamities as their own failure to master origin spirits. If clients' quest for ever more powerful shamans and authentic spirits becomes a way of life, the shamans' quest to acquire additional powers provides significance to an otherwise hopeless existence on the edge of an impoverished state.

Magnified skepticism

Most clients choose a shaman on the basis of a careful search and consultation with diviners, lamas, and clients about an individual's power, disposition, and the level of satisfaction with that individual's services. Scholars working in other places of the world have illustrated that skepticism is a necessary element of belief. Stacy Leigh Pigg (1996) illustrates

the paradoxical significance of skepticism in revealing and concealing identities in Nepal. The Nepali consider skepticism toward shamans a necessary sign of a modern identity. Yet, as Pigg argues, people who regard shamans as fakes are actually believers. Skepticism makes shamanism believable; by identifying fake shamans, a community finds believable shamans. Emily Chao (1999) has shown how disbelief in a particular shaman among the Naxi community in China has been historically constituted. The community evaluated the eccentric shaman's ritual as unsuccessful because state policies, religious transformation, and increased economic disparities had created conflicting criteria for evaluating ritual efficacy. Pigg and Chao have shown that skepticism is historically constituted and reveals contradictions within communities and the self-positioning and multiple identities of groups and individuals. Skepticism among the Buryats has played a crucial role in shamanic proliferation. It has generated an intense cultural production of travels, rituals, stories, genealogies, meanings, and practices, which has gradually led to the reconstitution of Buryats' collective identity vis-à-vis their state-suppressed past.

Buryat skepticism of shamans has been fueled by two major factors: the socialist state's disruption of the shamanic tradition and the arrival of a market economy. Most Buryats are convinced that the socialist suppression of religion undermined the tradition and eliminated "real" shamans and that the market economy has produced shamans who are not chosen by their origin spirits but are motivated by money. The devastating outcomes of state violence during the socialist era continue to affect the politics of shamanic practice today. From late 1937 through early 1939, Mongolia eliminated religion along with the intelligentsia, upper classes, and political leaders.¹⁶ In the span of about 18 months, 800 Buddhist temple compounds (5,953 buildings) became ash heaps. Of 85,000 lamas, 20,356 were killed and the rest were jailed, sent to labor camps, or forced to adopt lay professions (Baabar 1996). The state also destroyed individual families' genealogical records to strip the upper class of its identity and to create a homogenous society. As Baabar (1996) notes, by 1939 there were no official categories of religious practitioners registered in the census, and Mongolia became a classless and atheistic society. Secularization lasted until the weakening of socialism in the late 1980s.

Recent research on its suppression, as well as a lack of official documents, indicates shamanism's marginality within primarily Buddhist Mongolia as well as the Buryats' marginality vis-à-vis the ethnically predominant Khalha.¹⁷ Buddhist lamas are mentioned in records as targets of state repression, but there is almost no mention of shamans. Shamans may not have existed as an official religious category in the state census because, unlike lamas residing in monasteries, shamans lived like ordinary herdsmen and performed rituals in homes. The shamans possibly were not even considered worth mentioning, as the modernizing state

regarded them as more primitive, dark, and dangerous than the Buddhist lamas. Most importantly, the lack of statistics about the violence against shamanic practitioners shows the massiveness of the political violence: One did not have to be a shaman to be killed. Most Buryats were targets of violence. Stalin accused the Buryats of being White Czarist allies, counterrevolutionaries, Japanese allies against Soviet patronage, and initiators of a pan-Mongolist movement that aimed to build a Central Asian empire of Mongols. Approximately 30,000 Buryats were purged, about half of the adult Buryat population.¹⁸

Following the purges, shamanism shrank and became a secret, underground practice mostly carried out by women. Less visible to the state than the few Buryat men who remained alive after the purges, these female shamans conducted rituals at night in forests, away from settlements and roads. Shamanism did not die out, yet the state did its damage; it disrupted the tradition of passing down the practice within families. Shamans hid their practice rigorously from their children to protect them from persecution. A daughter of a famous female shaman, Handa, told me that her mother never performed her rituals in the presence of her children. Handa died in the 1980s at the age of 74; her daughter had never seen her mother's rituals. Another woman, Enke, told me that, as a little girl in the 1960s, she and her siblings were made to stand against the wall with raised hands as punishment after they sneaked into a prohibited ritual tent, heard shamanic chanting, and later imitated shamanic drumming in their own play by singing and beating on pot lids with sticks.

The socialist state regarded shamanism as a hindrance to transforming nomadic Mongolia into a more industrialized country based on Marxist evolutionary theory and Soviet-style cultural influences. It persecuted shamanism, a practice that brought shame to a newly modernizing nation-state struggling to catch up with the more developed socialist world.¹⁹ Besides atheists, believers in shamanism became skeptical of shamans who emerged in the 1990s.²⁰ The disruption of shamanic lineages within families meant that the generation of people born after the 1950s has lived in a largely secular society, in which the public rituals of shamanism have been absent. Thus, even though believers see a need to sponsor rituals to propitiate their angry origin spirits, they remain skeptical about the powers of the newly initiated shamans. These shamans lack credibility partly because only a small number of elder-generation shamans who lived through socialism were alive in the 1990s to offer guidance and teaching.

Besides the state disruption of religion, the "awakened" origin spirits' request for sheep-sacrifice rituals has triggered mistrust of shamans. The shamans (or the spirits) explain that spirits starved during socialism, "subsisting on rocks and dead flesh" as they hid from the state and as their atheist descendants "denied their existence." Now it is time to

“catch up” with their missed sacrifices. Many people question who is really speaking, the shaman or the spirit. And even if it is the spirit speaking, how much of the shaman’s own thought does the spirit convey? In impoverished Bayan-Uul, ritual is an expensive endeavor. Clients are anxious to figure out whether shamans are “business-driven actors” or “real” (not out for profit). If, among urban Korean shamans, wealth serves “as an advertisement of the efficacy of their spirits” (Kendall 1996:519), among the Buryats, a shaman who is either too rich or too poor may provoke doubts about his or her credibility. On the one hand, too much wealth creates doubt about the shaman’s motivation; profit is connected with a lack of morality. On the other hand, poverty indicates the incompetence of the spirits, especially if the shaman has been practicing for years. Overall, the prolonged disruption and secularization by the state and the greed that has been bred by the market economy have increased suspicion about shamans. Suspicion has led the Buryats to search for more authentic shamans and spirits. Yet instead of alleviating anxieties as expected, the search has aggravated them further. More-troubled audiences often stage additional “testing” rituals and seek more believable shamans.

A Buddhist lama, Bazar, used to frequent my room in Bayan-Uul and generously shared his “diagnosis” of the state of religion in Bayan-Uul with me over a cup of instant coffee and a cigarette. After serving in a monastery in Ulaanbaatar for six years, he came back to his native Bayan-Uul in 1999. He brought his teenage daughter to live with his mother, as his wife had left him after their ten-year-old son died in an accident. Like most Buryats, he believed in both shamanism and Buddhism but was cynical about the agencies of practitioners of both traditions. He was troubled by a shaman who told him that his family’s origin spirits had been blocked by the Buddhist deities and that it was time for him to renounce his Buddhist oath and to be initiated as a shaman. Because he had no way to check the truth behind the words of the shaman, Bazar was not in a hurry to be initiated.

He was convinced that, because of the long period of religious suppression, the Buryat community had lost its knowledge and ability to separate the real shamans from the fake. The anxiety over economic uncertainty has led many people to sponsor rituals to avoid possible misfortunes. Yet most people do it blindly without being aware of the powers and motivations of the practitioners. The newly reemerged religion is in a growing phase, and Bazar called it “a transitional religion” (*zavsrin shashin*). He neatly summarized the religious predicament of Bayan-Uul to me in one of our conversations:

We have been going through a difficult time since our religion has been reviving after decades of [state] suppression. Our religion is no longer true and clean and, instead, it has become an ambiguous, impure, and a

“transitional” entity. It will take time for the common people to develop mechanisms to identify a true religion from a fake one—a filtering mechanism. Then religion will clean itself up from fake and incompetent ones.

Bazar was disconcerted by the amount of work that clients must do before launching rituals. Travels, consultations, and finding resources to pay a shaman defeat the very purpose of religion: to help ordinary people live through their suffering. Indeed, instead of finding peace as a result of going to shamans, they often become more anxious because of the uncertainty of the shamans’ claims. Clients rigorously scrutinize a shaman’s findings. They discuss the process and the results and raise further questions about the ritual. They question whether the shaman sang their evocations properly, if the spirit answered their questions to their satisfaction, and if the newly found spirits are authentic. Skepticism expands shamanic practice, as clients sponsor more rituals with other practitioners to solicit second or third opinions; search for additional spirits who might be triggering their problems; continually stage rituals to check the efficacy of previous rituals; attend others’ rituals to converse with unknown spirits, seeking additional messages; and consult with diviners and other shamans.

Suspending disbelief

If state disruption of religion and practitioners’ greed have inflated disbelief in shamans, then why do people still seek their help? What makes shamans believable enough? The disruption of shamanic tradition has undermined people’s knowledge about the past as well as about what shamans are supposed to be like. Thus, the people’s admission of their lack of knowledge and their willingness to suspend disbelief sustain the proliferation of shamanic practices. Not only are audiences suspicious about a shaman’s credibility but they also acknowledge their own ignorance about the tradition because of its previous suppression. Many individuals who were born after the 1940s attended shamanic rituals for the first time in their lives after the fall of socialism. Because of the disruption of the past, people have a persistent sense that there is always something important to know about that past; they are filled with anxiety about the need to sponsor yet another ritual and summon yet another spirit to find the answers to their questions.

Often, however, both the rituals and the consultations expand the knowledge vacuum and precipitate further searching. During public rituals, shamans become possessed by origin spirits—the spirits of individuals from the Buryats’ past. Whether these are the spirits of ancestors who served in Chingis Khan’s army in the 13th century or spirits of the community leaders during Russian colonialism in Siberia, there is no a good way to verify that these individuals are actually the Buryats’ ancestors. The Buryats are invested

in finding their true origin spirits, because “adopting” a fake or an outside spirit is futile and overlooking a “real” origin spirit brings more misfortunes. Admitting their lack of knowledge about shamanic practices leads people to attend rituals “just in case it helps.” Even the few individuals I knew who initially claimed to know what real shamans are supposed to be like admitted their limits when new spirits brought new information. The long-term state amnesia had shaken people’s confidence in the truthfulness of the very knowledge that they possess.

The Buryats continue to launch rituals in their search for the most authentic spirits and the most able shaman because most people’s misfortunes persist. Does that mean that the rituals of propitiation are ineffective? Or are there more spirits to propitiate? The Buryats attempt to identify the exact causes of their misfortunes from a myriad of possibilities. Among them are the following: They need to worship spirits higher in the hierarchy of the celestial world; the spirits want more sacrifices and specific gifts; the shaman has failed to deliver the gifts to the spirits; the spirits are too weak to help; and the spirits are not “real.” Any one or several of these possibilities can apply to a person’s case. With more spirits awakened and more possibilities to identify, the uncertainty about misfortunes is aggravated. Despite the high costs involved in shamanic consultations, the skeptical Buryats’ search continues for more powerful shamans and more authentic spirits who can provide “better” explanations and more sophisticated solutions for their misfortunes.

The persistence of misfortunes proves the existence of spirits, especially the vindictive ones. The origin spirits from the Buryat distant past, who had resisted Russian colonialism, protected Buryat lands from foreign settlers, and confronted the Buddhist missionaries were all suppressed by the state. Deprived of propitiation from their descendants, hungry, angry, and violent, these spirits inflict misfortunes on their descendants to remind them of their presence. Yet the endless propitiation seems to help only a little if at all.

As the Buryats attempt to appease their angry origin spirits, they have also encountered ambiguous spiritlike entities whose identities, names, and places of habitation are hard to discern. In the visions of shamans and in divinations using coins and rosaries, they “appear” as incomplete origin spirits. The Buryats (and most other Mongolians) refer to them as *uheer*. Unlike origin spirits, which are verbal memorials—created with the proper rituals of burial, mourning, and remembering—the *uheer* are the tormented souls of the people who received no proper burials and mourning from their descendants and who did not become origin spirits. They do not possess shamans, but they trouble their descendants. These are the spirits of those who were persecuted by the state and, without burials and propitiation, could not “move” from the human world to the celestial realm. The spirit world reflects events in human society. The

marginality of the *uheer* in the spirit world evokes how ordinary citizens were made into outcasts of the socialist state. The following story of Dava reveals that these spiritlike creatures are the souls of the people who died during the state suppression of religion, especially during the time of great purges that were ordered by Stalin from 1937 to the 1940s.

The spirit trapped in a hidden burial

The oldest son in a family of six children, Dava was puzzled about the troubles in his family, despite the family’s diligent worship of origin spirits secretly during socialism. The family was so ridden with misfortunes that one of Dava’s brothers became a Buddhist lama and took care of the family gods and deities. Yet his sister’s husband died in an accident, and three brothers in their early twenties drank heavily. When drunk, they became violent and threw the iron stove, furniture, and loose bricks from the backyard. The family was always worried that one day, this behavior would end in the murder of the entire family. The situation was so hopeless that the old shaman Molom, who had always helped the rest of the family, explicitly told them that the drinking problems of these boys were beyond his powers. After Molom died in the mid-1990s, the family broke from shamanic practices, but when, among many misfortunes, the youngest daughter became sick with an unknown illness, Dava decided to again seek help from shamans.

First, he consulted a female shaman, Chimeg. At that time, Dava’s family worshipped five origin spirits. During her ritual, Chimeg found many more, but Dava, doubtful of Chimeg’s credibility, decided to launch additional rituals with other shamans. Over time, he sought help from the shamans Gavril and Tsend, among others. After many rituals checking, comparing, and testing the authenticity of spirits and sorting out the fake ones from the real, Dava was still puzzled by the behavior of some of the spirits. One spirit, named Oidov, was especially troublesome. All the shamans Dava consulted claimed that Oidov existed and that his propitiation might reveal the causes of the boys’ problems. But none of the shamans were able to summon the spirit Oidov to the ritual arena, as they could not find his rhymes of evocation (*huudal buudal*). The rhymes consist of the names and descriptions of the spirit’s place of habitation, cremation, and play—a river or a lake. Besides the name “Oidov,” the shamans knew nothing.

Finally, during one of many rituals, Chimeg became possessed by her origin spirits, one after another. Dava asked each one about Oidov’s evocation, but the spirits avoided attending to Dava’s request. Each spirit pointed to other spirits from whom to seek information about Oidov and quickly left Chimeg. Finally, a spirit named Chödör spoke the following: “The place where Oidov was buried is filled with tormented people. Its sacred nature has been forgotten, no propitiation has been given for generations. Oidov was the lord of

that place, but not any more. It is an ambiguous gathering place.”

Dava asked the spirit Chödör, “How do we evoke him to the ritual?”

Chödör replied, “Because the place is wrecked, no name comes to me. Try these words”:

On the beautiful tall hill you have been buried
A fast river crosses your path
A powerful hero of your people,
Badam's son Oidov.

Dava remembered the rhymes, and after Chödör left, the shaman Chimeg evoked Oidov. Still, he did not arrive; there were too many obstacles in the way. Chimeg offered libations to her origin spirits and asked them to bring Oidov to the ritual arena. After a long period of drumming, during which Chimeg sent the rest of her origin spirits to guard Oidov's road to the ritual arena, he arrived and possessed Chimeg. Everyone expected that Oidov would be an aggressive spirit, but in a slow, steady voice he sang the following:

In the cold prison of Khalka I suffered
With metal chains on my ankles
I could not reach my destination
No rituals evoked me from wilderness,
No drum summoned me out of my rock house,
I turned your intelligence into dullness and confusion
I made you restless and hopeless
Your red brain is under my control
Your destinies are no longer yours

In response to these complaints, the audience bowed, pleaded for forgiveness, and promised to accept Oidov as their true ancestor and to remember and worship him.

We are your beloved children of later generation
We are your ignorant descendants
Forgive us for not “seeing” you summoning us [refers to a waving hand gesture]
Forgive us for not “hearing” you calling us
The time was “difficult,” the state was harsh
From this time on we bow to you as you are real to us
We will worship you forever as [an origin spirit]
We will remember you forever

After becoming “real” for the descendants, having a sip of tea and a gulp of milk vodka, and obtaining a promise of a sheep sacrifice, the spirit Oidov was supposed to stop harming his descendants and to bring them success and well-being instead. Oidov required many rituals to make up for the ones that he had missed during socialism, mainly rituals to promote him to the world of spirits. The efficacy of the ritual,

without doubt, lay in the emotionality of the language that Chimeg used to communicate with the audience while she was possessed (Bruno 2002). In addition, the content of the speech, which evoked a tragic history and stated the necessity of continuing the rituals, contributed to her believability.

According to Oidov's speech, he was a shaman during his life. He was taken to jail, most likely during the political repression of 1937–40. He was killed and presumably buried together with other victims of political cleansing. Dava's family guessed that because the burial place was unmarked and hidden from the public, Chimeg's origin spirits could not find the place name for the evocation. Too many tormented souls had been trapped in that burial place without it being known to the public. They “showed up” in the spirit Chödör's vision as tormented people crowding the place. In this case, the hopeless drinking, violence, and despair in Dava's family were attributed to the spirit Oidov, who sent misfortunes to attract the notice of his descendants so that he could become a proper origin spirit in the celestial world.

Dava's family had finally explained its misfortunes. For me, Oidov was unusual; he was one of a very few origin spirits who had returned from the heyday of socialism (1940–80). The Buryats have almost no origin spirits from the socialist era. Most of their origin spirits come from the distant past, and only a few new spirits emerged after the collapse of socialism. This gap in the spiritual history of the Buryats corresponds with the era of socialism, the era of violent religious suppression. Only the spirits of two female shamans, who had secretly practiced and died during socialism, had returned to the community (Buyandelgeriyin 2004). Most people who died during the repression had not materialized as origin spirits but had become uheer.

Stuck between the human and spirit worlds, the souls of the victims of violent deaths, the uheer, contribute to the current misfortunes of the Buryats. In ordinary life, the Buryats avoid revealing their memories of persecution. The new generation is growing up without much knowledge about the violence in the 1940s and the everyday, small-scale persecution during socialism. Even today, Mongolia does not have a truth commission. The rehabilitation of the victims of political repression has been a slow process controlled by the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, and there is no nationwide awareness of the need to air such memories. People who have tried to recover the memories of the victims have received little or no structural support and have even been threatened. Silenced, the memories of the victims of the purges take the form of malevolent spirits, such as uheer, and, by inflicting misfortunes on their descendants, they force the living to face their suppressed memories of the state violence. Although the Buryats who are initiated as shamans serve their origin spirits and harness the spirits' powers, they also have to deal with the incomplete spirits who monumentalize the silenced memories of state violence. In fact, the transformation of entities in the

Buryat spirit world into angry and vindictive beings is partly the outcome of the geopolitical domination of Stalin, who ordered the state to purge the clergy and the Buryats. It is also partly the outcome of the actions of the socialist state, which, rather than prevent the violence, committed it on a devastating scale.

Spiritual uncertainty

The spirits awakened after socialism are believed to roam in unrest in search of their descendants. The spirits who do not find their descendants tend to adhere to anyone who provides them with food and entertainment. Individuals who knowingly “adopt” these “wild” “orphaned” spirits are believed to do so to send curses and pollution and to manipulate others. The spirits, however, can be steered in both moral and immoral directions and can grant any wishes of the hosts. “Awakened” spirits can also accompany people without their knowledge, “reading” their hosts’ bad or good intentions and materializing them.

Ideally, shamans are expected to help the human world by taming the spirits. With at least one shaman per family, one would expect some success in appeasing the spirit world. The pervasiveness of misfortune over good fortune, however, creates fear and suspicion about shamans’ “problematic morality” (Lindquist 2002) and the possibility that they may harm, not help. Every ailment, sickness, accident, business loss, or even family fight can be attributed to the curse of a jealous neighbor, a quarrelsome woman down the street, or anyone who has employed a shaman with magical powers.

The Buryats are most afraid of skilled shamans who are intentionally harmful toward others. A suspicion that shamans manipulate spirits to control fellow humans is prevalent. Scholars have shown that accusations of witchcraft have increased in postcolonial African societies because of disenchantment with the “failed state” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) and neoliberal capitalism (Ashforth 2001; Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1998; Moore and Sanders 2001). Similarly, in Mongolia, economic crises, other misfortunes, and fear of curses and pollution are fruitful grounds for accusing a shaman of causing harm. The multitude of shamans only aggravates the existing skepticism. The suspicion and mistrust surrounding shamanism and, at the same time, its importance in explaining misfortune recall E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1976) description of Azande witchcraft and magic.

Because shamans are believed to harm, there is an urgent need for other shamans who can deflect such harm. In the context of fear of being harmed by shamans, finding a helpful shaman who is also believable is a daunting task. Whereas almost every shaman can send curses and pollution, only the most powerful can deflect the harms of the curser-shamans. The saver-shamans’ work often requires more ritual knowledge and spiritual power because they ul-

timately “unmake” someone’s intricate work of curses and pollution. The saver-shamans need to figure out the ways curses were formulated, the “vehicles” on which they were “mounted” (wind, object, spirits, or people), how to “undo” them without harming themselves and their clients, and, then, how to protect themselves and their clients. Most of the time, regardless of a shaman’s power and success, removing and deflecting curses and pollution are considered dangerous: The cursers often set up “side effects” for shamans (or others) who “unmake” curses. If a saver-shaman tries to undo the curses of a more powerful shaman, the saver-shaman is easily harmed. Most shamans tend to refuse to deal with curses even if they could succeed in undoing them.

Believing in one shaman’s curse does not presuppose belief in another shaman’s ability to eliminate it because of the time lag required for recovery. Curses immediately cause accidents, illnesses, and financial losses. The recovery that results from the removal of curses and pollution is slower, depending on the level of damage done.

Mistrust of shamans’ powers to deflect curses is so prevalent that some people suggest an unusual strategy for dealing with misfortunes. If people manage to identify the shaman who has cursed them (through another shaman or a diviner), they might consider going to that individual. Pretending not to know the causes of their misfortunes, they would politely request help from that shaman. In return, the shaman, without revealing that he was the curser, would “remove” the curse that he inflicted. Although many discussed this strategy, only few people had had the courage to go to a curser. Such a reverse strategy of dealing with mistrust of shamans reflects the Buryats’ predicament in the aftermath of socialism. They seek the services of shamans to make sense of their ongoing misfortunes and anxiety, but they often do not believe in the power of shamans and the truthfulness of their interpretations and services because of the disruption of religion and the arrival of a market economy.

Shamanism involves many uncertainties even for the most devoted believers. Besides the moral standing of a shaman, clients are concerned about a shaman’s actual powers. Even if a shaman is truthful and morally harmless, clients are still suspicious that he or she might be possessed during rituals by a “pretender-spirit,” that is, one who pretends to be the spirit that the shaman has summoned (his or her tutelary spirit). Another concern is the reality of one’s newly “awakened” spirits. Clients want to know if the spirits really do belong to their ancestral lineage, are made up by the shaman, or are “invader-pretender-spirits” who seek a human host and the opportunity to be included in someone’s ancestral spirit lineage. One needs to check if a shaman’s rituals have succeeded in their goal and if clients’ gifts are properly delivered to the powerful spiritual entities by the shaman’s origin spirits.

All these uncertainties lead clients to test shamans’ powers and the efficacy of their rituals and, ultimately, to seek

more powerful shamans. Both fear of the possibility of a shaman's mistake and uncertainty caused by the loss of the tradition have created a persistent anxiety that there is always something important to know about one's past. Such an anxiety drives people to seek more powerful shamans who can provide "missing," "deeper," or more "truthful" knowledge. To separate fake or weak shamans from the real and the most powerful, clients have discussed various strategies. Some have expressed a need to develop criteria for judging the truthfulness of shamans and the reality of spirits. That has led to the idea of putting together a shamanic "legal court" consisting of shamans who could summon powerful spirits that would be able to judge the work of shamans. But in the end, these are virtually impossible measures, and clients employ their own individual strategies for testing the shamans and the spirits.

Almost everyone solicits opinions about shamans. They ask about the reality of spirits and the truthfulness of previously consulted shamans from other shamans who live in different parts of Bayan-Uul as well as from Buddhist lamas, lay lamas, diviners, and other people who claim to retrieve information with the help of supernatural entities. Many people solicit second, third, and more opinions. Often, however, instead of finding answers, clients receive unanticipated information that leads them to more questions, more uncertainty, and more anxiety. Almost every additional shaman clients consult "discovers" yet another origin spirit who is also responsible for misfortunes. Some shamans predict another misfortune in the near future that needs to be avoided through ritual. Others trace misfortune to a distant relative whose angry ancestors trouble the entire extended family. The relative needs to be brought in for rituals to stop the misfortunes. In short, a client who goes to a shaman with only a couple of questions tends to return with many more. The testing of a shaman is a continuously evolving process. Such testing creates an array of rituals and discourses and more ambiguities. In fact, the most skeptical audience tends to be the most active in searching for truth, reaching out to an increasing number of practitioners, covering longer distances, and staging more rituals. Skeptical clients inadvertently end up supporting the very proliferation of shamanic practices that they contest and criticize.

Some people who have saved their genealogical records try to test the truthfulness of the newly "awakened" spirits by checking for the spirits' names in the records (see Figure 3). But shamans convince them that the absence of the name of a particular origin spirit does not mean that the spirit is unreal or nonexistent. Rather, the name is missing because of violence, migration, or other reasons. Shamans make a particularly strong point by arguing that the erasure of an origin spirit's name from the genealogical record is one of the worst causes of misfortune, far worse than forgetting the spirits whose names do exist in the records.²¹ Clients test such counterclaims by soliciting answers from several

different shamans and lamas and even by conversing with unacquainted spirits during someone else's rituals. In the following account, I trace the attempt of a woman named Dolgor to make sense of her suffering within the contexts of testing the shamans and building her ancestral lineage as her daughter went through the process of becoming a shaman.

Testing the shamans

Dolgor, a widow in her fifties, was a former primary schoolteacher, who lived on a pension of 10,000 *tögrögs* (approximately \$10 a month). She structured her daily life around baking small rolls of bread and selling them at the market. Her bread-making business was based on expenses of 1,000 *tögrög*, equivalent to approximately \$1. For this amount, she bought six pounds of wheat flour. With three pounds, she baked four or five small rolls of bread and sold them through her acquaintance at the local market. With the remaining three pounds of flour, she baked a loaf of bread and made noodles for soup for her family of seven: herself, two twin daughters in their early twenties, and four grandchildren. The next day, if all the bread had sold, she received up to 1,500 *tögrögs*. Dolgor bought another six pounds of flour for 1,000 *tögrögs*, repeated her bread-making routine, and spent the remaining 500 *tögrögs* for a candle or a bar of soap. If her bread did not sell, her business suffered, and Dolgor cut down on purchases, first of candles, then of soap, and sometimes even of flour for daily bread.

Dolgor attributed her impoverished life to failed marriages of six of her eight daughters. Dolgor's oldest daughter was divorced from an abusive husband, had left her son with Dolgor, and worked in Ulaanbaatar at a meat market. Her next oldest daughter lived in a neighboring district with her in-laws, who "treated her like a slave," as Dolgor put it. Her third daughter's husband was abusive and rationed his wife's daily bread. Without stable jobs, the couple got by on petty trading, hunting, and gardening. Her three other daughters left for Ulaanbaatar, where they worked 18-hour days in an international clothing factory and slept with other country girls packed in the factory hallways like sardines in a can. None of the older daughters was well enough off to help Dolgor bring up the two younger ones, who lived at home, and the grandchildren. Once a year, before the Mongolian (lunar) new year in January or February, the daughters who lived in Ulaanbaatar would send a 50-pound bag of wheat flour to make new-year cakes, or a box of washing detergent.

Although I was initially surprised by Dolgor's remark attributing her poverty to her daughters' bad marriages, after living in the area for a year and closely befriending her, I realized that, from her point of view, she was right on several levels. Following the collapse of socialism (which used to provide equal opportunities for men and women) and the development of the private sphere, the role of men as providers increased, whereas women, especially in rural

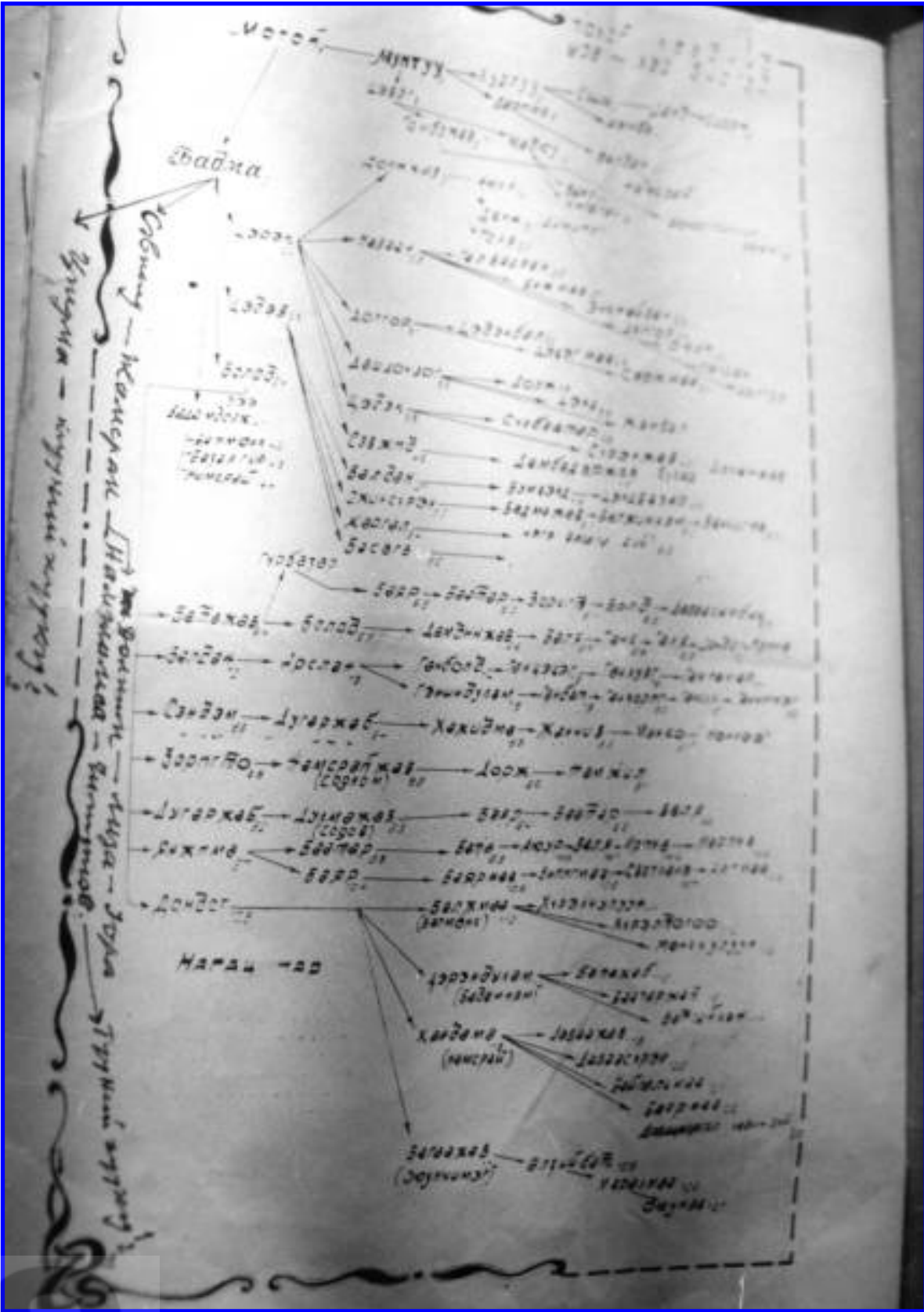


Figure 3. Recovered genealogical record of a Buryat family. Photo by Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn.

areas, became more dependent on their husbands and male relatives.²²

The unsuccessful marriages of her daughters are related, in turn, according to Dolgor, to forgetting the origin spirits of her deceased husband. He was an ethnic Khalha and, according to Dolgor, was of the Borjigin clan (Chingis Khan's clan). One of her twin daughters, Tsagan, was initiated as a shaman. Tsagan's teacher was the female shaman Chimeg, who was also Dolgor's cousin. Dolgor took it as her mission to ensure the well-being of the shaman-teacher. According to Dolgor, her family's life would improve once the family found and worshipped all of its origin spirits.

No one really knew, however, who the family's origin spirits were, especially the ones who died long ago. Dolgor devoted her time, energy, and precious resources to endless rituals to find, worship, and ask the protection of newly awakened origin spirits. Dolgor had to determine if the spirits who possessed the shaman-teacher and her daughter Tsagan truly belonged to her family lineage or if they were simply outsider-spirits seeking a human host, food, and entertainment. At the same time, because of her suspicions about the power of Chimeg to summon real spirits, Dolgor spent just as much energy and resources launching rituals with other shamans and diviners to check the reality of the newfound spirits. Along with the rituals accepting her origin spirits, she often launched rituals to send off unwanted outsider-spirits. Instead of material enrichment, I saw in Dolgor the emergence of new types of anxieties and "spiritual insecurities" (Ashforth 2001) based on her preoccupation with the safety of her shaman-daughter and the authenticity of the spirits.

When, after a couple of years as a shaman, Tsagan became restless and unhappy, Dolgor began doubting whether her daughter was supposed to have become a shaman to begin with. (I thought Tsagan was restless at least in part because of her limited opportunities, poverty, and her mother's control.) Dolgor remembered Tsagan's "nomination" as more of an accident than anything else. It happened when Tsagan was attending someone else's ritual: She felt someone pulling her shirt and calling to her. At that time, Chimeg told Tsagan that she had spirits surrounding her. Dolgor regretted later that she agreed to initiate Tsagan as a shaman without checking with other shamans. Only later she noticed that, although Chimeg was a thorough performer, she required many head of livestock from her clients in payment for rituals. But most troubling was that, in every family for whom Chimeg conducted a ritual, she nominated a person to be initiated as a shaman. Dolgor became suspicious, wondering whether Chimeg did so on purpose to receive gifts and attention. She became worried that Chimeg might have initiated Tsagan for the same mercenary reason.

Dolgor began collecting rumors about Chimeg. She even made a trip to an old and well-respected shaman who

commented that Chimeg handed over her clients to her spirits. Afterward, these spirits followed the clients and requested that they be initiated as shamans. That was dangerous. A person should not be connected with an unrelated spirit. And not everyone is supposed to become a shaman. The old shaman said that he had to "disconnect" some of those people from Chimeg's spirits and "clean up Chimeg's mess," as he put it. It was possible that Chimeg was not aware of the behavior of her spirits; if so, that was very dangerous. It meant that she did not control her spirits fully and they were behaving any way they wanted to. But the old shaman assured Dolgor that, in Tsagan's case, Chimeg had not made a mistake and that Tsagan was supposed to become a shaman.

After establishing that Tsagan was destined to become a shaman, Dolgor became uncertain if Chimeg was a good enough teacher for her daughter. Dolgor worried because Tsagan continued to be restless and cross with family members and tended to disappear for days on end. She decided to check if Chimeg was a suitable teacher for her daughter. Furthermore, Dolgor was troubled by Chimeg's carelessness, forgetfulness, and interest in drinking, all of which might have negatively influenced Tsagan. Most importantly, Chimeg did not "protect" herself properly during her rituals with her origin spirits and exposed herself to the attacks of "invader-pretender" spirits, who could possess her instead of her designated origin spirits and harm her.

That actually happened once during a big ceremony when Dolgor was "giving" the "gifts of completion" to Chimeg's origin spirits in payment to those spirits for teaching and taking care of her daughter Tsagan. Halfway through the ceremony, the spirit that possessed Chimeg drank too much, stayed longer than usual, became rude to the audience, and then left without "taking" the alcohol with him. After that, three other spirits possessed Chimeg, and all behaved similarly. The next morning Dolgor asked Chimeg to evoke her origin spirits, and when the shaman was possessed by one of these spirits, Dolgor inquired about the events that had taken place in the spirit world the previous night. Chimeg's origin spirit said that her two most respectful spirits had left with Dolgor's gifts, to deliver them to higher gods. Therefore, only two younger spirits remained to defend Chimeg: One had wrestled with the outside spirits who were trying to enter Chimeg's threshold, and the other had stayed in Chimeg's mirror (shield) to defend her life. Chimeg had not summoned additional origin spirits to defend her ritual arena. The outside spirits possessed Chimeg; all had been sent by the shaman Damdin. Perhaps he did it to harm Chimeg or to boast of his powers. A shaman must summon his or her spirits and retain them to serve as a citadel, not allowing outsiders to "enter" his or her body. Somehow, Chimeg had not been able to do that and had allowed random spirits to possess her.

In addition to uncertainty about Chimeg's ability as a teacher, Dolgor became suspicious about whether the

spirits that possessed her daughter really belonged to her family's lineage. Dolgor's daughter's case was especially ambiguous and difficult because Dolgor's husband was not Buryat but Khalha, and, thus, his origin spirits were different from Buryat spirits. Because in the Buryat district only a few people had Khalha origin spirits, it was hard to say how to judge the truthfulness of those spirits.

Dolgor secretly went to other shamans and asked about the origin spirits revealed by Chimeg. She established that some of the spirits evoked by Chimeg were her ancestors, but when she learned that a spirit named Ajnai did not belong to her family, she became concerned about the safety of her daughter. How could she tolerate unrelated spirits possessing her daughter? She launched a ritual to send Ajnai off.

After taking care of Chimeg's mistake regarding the spirit Ajnai, Dolgor decided to change Tsagan's teacher. She thought of Tsend, but realized that because of his old age, he would be apt to omit or forget things and to make mistakes. She went to other shamans, but no one agreed to take on Tsagan after Chimeg. No one wanted another enemy. (I suspect no one agreed because Dolgor had little to offer anyone for teaching her daughter.) As I was completing my fieldwork and preparing to leave the district of Bayan-Uul, Dolgor heard of a younger male shaman, Bold, in a neighboring district. In a letter she subsequently wrote to me, she said that she finally had met with the shaman Bold and that he had agreed to become Tsagan's teacher.

Dolgor's journey in the world of shamans and spirits continues even today. Only because my own journey as an anthropologist in Bayan-Uul ended, I end Dolgor's story. To some extent, Dolgor's (and others') endeavors might seem meaningless to readers who associate misfortunes with the tangible events of contemporary life. But her origin spirits who arrived from the distant past recounted stories about their lives. Even if the spirits were not "real" and only temporarily possessed the ritual, they still deposited their stories, a version of which I recount briefly below, in the memories of Dolgor and other Buryats.

In life, the spirit Dovchin was a lama and a healer who knew the magic Buddhist spells (*dharani*), but he also propitiated his shamanic origin spirits in secret. From his speech, Dolgor guessed that he lived around the 18th century and combined the powers of Buddhism and shamanism. He studied in Tibet when he was young. Because he learned all the tricks, his Tibetan teachers wanted him to stay in Tibet and even tried to force him to remain there. His shamanic spirits helped him to get back to Mongolia safely. Dovchin requested that Dolgor's family give him snuff.

Choijsmaa was a female spirit and had been a warrior. She was particularly demanding, capricious, and vicious. She requested a human sacrifice as the price for worshipping her banner. She died at the age of 25 while fighting a war against

Manchu colonialism. When she possessed Tsagan, she cried that she had never had a chance to love and be loved or to be a mother. She was killed violently in battle and her desire for revenge against her enemies tormented her as a spirit. Choijsmaa's subversive nature was evident from her requests for human sacrifice, as only the highest-ranking male warlords offered their banners sacrifices by killing their enemies. Dolgor wrote to me that the spirit Choijsmaa requested a traditional hair ornament made with silver and studded with pearls and turquoise, leather boots with white leather soles, and a blue silk traditional robe (*degel*) for Tsagan to wear during possession.

Boorshi, one of the nine military commanders of Chingis Khan's army in the 13th century, was also Dolgor's family's origin spirit.²³ Boorshi did not possess Tsagan for several months. That is because his burial place is located somewhere in central Mongolia, but no monument to him has ever been erected. His burial place has been turned into a vacation place. Boorshi became an origin spirit because he was a "white" shaman healer, a bonesetter. He saved many people's lives on the battlefield. When Boorshi possessed Tsagan, he marched and mimicked shooting an arrow and riding on horseback. He especially liked to whistle marching melodies. The spirit Boorshi requested a bow and arrow from Dolgor's family.

Another spirit, named Khar Chono (Black Wolf), had been a shaman as well as a revolutionary around the turn of the 20th century. He sang songs against the rich and powerful and stole rich people's horses and distributed them to the poor.

As is apparent in the foregoing descriptions, most of Tsagan's spirits were individuals from wars and anticolonial and revolutionary struggles. This array of spirits may indicate a subversion of identity for Tsagan, whose gender, age, social standing, and resources prevented her from further development as a shaman. Yet Dolgor strongly believed that once her daughter completed the worship of all her origin spirits, summoned them to the ritual arena and was possessed by them, and completed a few more shanars, she would be able to earn a living through shamanic practice.

I followed many individuals who, like Dolgor, spent their time, energy, and resources trying to figure out the truthfulness of spirits and the powers of shamans to resolve anxieties and uncertainties. Some were able to pursue different shamans on a relatively equal basis without committing to one and without being initiated into shamanism themselves. Others continued to pursue a single shaman. For many, the search for truth became almost a way of life and a spiritual and economic trap. Instead of expected material enrichment, people collected more spirits to propitiate, more questions to answer, and more rituals to stage. Dolgor's and many other people's existing economic anxieties and uncertainties increased and became entangled with spiritual anxieties.

For instance, shamans told my neighbor Suren to be initiated as a shaman to appease her origin spirits; otherwise, she would die, like her seven younger siblings. But Suren refused to believe the shamans. She confronted spirits who seemed to endlessly request rituals. She lamented to me,

During last night's ceremony, they [spirits] requested a black goat that we took from our deity Dorlik (god of blacksmith) many years ago. Yes, I remember, we ate that goat when I was six years old! My father was arrested and killed during the repression. My mother was left with me and my two younger siblings who could hardly walk. We, the families of the repressed were told to leave our homes. We were herded like sheep to a new place without our belongings. We were on the verge of starvation and ate that goat! It was the only thing left because it was consecrated for Dorlik. But did the spirit want us to starve to death!

Suren was convinced that the local shamans knew a great deal about her family life, parents, and grandparents and that they would surely find enough information to convince her to be initiated as a shaman. Suren did not believe that they retrieved any more information than ordinary people. She decided to travel to a faraway district and spend her precious resources to find unacquainted shamans who knew nothing about her past. She could only find out the truth from a shaman who did not know her.

Conclusion: Economic and spiritual uncertainties

The growth of shamanism against the grain of disbelief, based on audiences' search for authenticity, shows that the "unmaking" of socialist life and surviving incipient capitalism involve activities and concerns that lie far beyond the dismantling of the institutions and structures of everyday life. "Unmaking" (mis)knowledge promulgated under socialism, "discovering" unclear rules of incipient capitalism, and learning to survive on one's own change people and their perceptions of the world as well as of themselves. The "unmaking" of socialism is also a remaking of identities. Among the Buryats of Mongolia, this remaking has occurred specifically through explaining present misfortunes by reference to the past, in the form of "awakened" origin spirits that were suppressed by socialism. It is only by explaining the present through past history and by connecting the tragic history of oppression with the present misfortunes that the Buryats build their identities.

The Buryats' interest in carrying their past into their present to make their identities at least partially complete is more legible in the context of the kind of identity construction promoted by state socialism. Under socialism, the future was more important than the past or the present. As Rubie Watson (1994) has rightfully pointed out, state socialism knew its future but suppressed its past; it did not really

know its history. The future was laid out for many people within the socialist structure: when to go to school, what schools guaranteed certain types of jobs, when to retire, and the amount of salary one received. This structure showed one the possibilities as well as the limits. At least to a certain extent, not only one's past but also the imagining of one's future shapes identities and individualities. The Mongolian past was altered and suppressed by socialism. The imagined future of socialism disappeared with the "storm of the market economy." The present was ridden with changes and was out of control. What, then, does it mean to live in a place with an unimaginable future, an unknown past, and a present full of misfortune? People do many things to make their suffering bearable, as Clifford Geertz (1973) notes, and one of them, at least in Mongolia, is to seek out shamans.

Buryat shamanism in a postsocialist context has a somewhat paradoxical effect on people. It is expected "to help people survive their misfortunes," as one old shaman put it. Yet most people who have gone to shamans have found themselves experiencing ever greater anxiety and are suspicious of shamans. A desire to find out the "truth" drives people to seek out additional shamans and to accumulate origin spirits. This situation calls to mind Adam Ashforth's (2001) argument that, in addition to dealing with poverty, people in the African city of Soweto have to wrestle with spiritual insecurity and suppressing witchcraft.

Similar to the one facing the people of Soweto, the predicament of those living in Bayan-Uul, in addition to finding daily sustenance, is to deal with shamanic discourse and politics. Many people ignore shamans and do not consult them, but the ongoing economic crisis and other misfortunes, including illnesses and deaths, often bring desperate people to shamans. Shamans create in their clients a feeling of incompleteness about one's life based on the mysteriousness of one's past. Because shamanism operates on the principle that the past determines one's future, many living with ongoing economic crisis feel a sense of urgency to trace their past. There is always the threat of spirits taking what they want, including people's lives. In Mongolia, clients' persistence in testing shamans makes the persuasiveness of shamans more legible. In turn, shamans' persuasiveness in making people seek their help reveals the ongoing nature of misfortunes brought by the new order.

Economic uncertainty and anxiety have led to spiritual anxiety, which in turn, has triggered the work of testing the shamans by a suspicious, "truth"-seeking audience. The proliferation of shamanism is largely based on mistrust of shamans, which is one of the lasting repercussions of state violence. Belief in shamanism after socialism acquired new meanings and reemerged as a way of making misfortunes meaningful by revealing, through spirits, the suppressed memories of the state violence. Shamans explain that current misfortunes are the outcomes of the revenge of origin spirits.

Not only does the Buryats' explanation give meaning to their misfortunes and justify the truthfulness of spirits but it also situates their current misfortunes and resulting uncertainties in the shifting landscape of their spiritual and social history. That history is encompassed by the stories, imaginings, and ritual performances that emerge from clients' endless search for shamans. By searching for truth (to resolve their misfortunes), the Buryats (somewhat inadvertently) create their history, and they also turn themselves into living nodes of historical consciousness by becoming shamans. For the Buryats searching for their past and future, only by becoming metaphoric extensions of their ancestral lineage can they make their surroundings meaningful. The question here is not whether the Buryats find truth or not. As Mary Margaret Steedly (2000) argues, the more important issue is how an event is evoked and interpreted in a certain way and not in another. In the Buryat case, misfortunes become linked with memories of historical oppression, and shamanic interpretations allow individuals to situate themselves in the larger history of multiple oppression and marginalization within Mongolia, which, in turn, has been oppressed by geopolitical powers. Such process gives meaning to selves otherwise lost in the feeling of incompleteness and lack of identity. In some limited sense, the search for material salvation does not succeed for most people but yields history instead.

Notes

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1. This article concerns the country once known to the Western world as Outer Mongolia. Mongolia was indirectly ruled by the Manchu-Chinese Qing Dynasty from 1634 to 1911. After gaining its independence from the Qing in 1911, it fell under Soviet domination from 1921 until the democratic revolution there in 1990. Inner Mongolia has fallen under increasing Chinese influence since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and is now known as the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region. For accounts on the partition of Mongolia, see Kotkin and Elleman 1999 and Rupen 1964, 1979.

2. The Buryat Mongol word for spirit is *ongon*. The word *ug garval* is used only among Buryats and refers particularly to ancestral spirits, who are the founding members, the origins, of lineages.

3. For selected research in English on Buryats in Russia, see Humphrey 1979, 1994, 1995 and on Buryats in Mongolia, see Bulag 1998. Russian works include Batuyev 1977, 1996; Gerasimova with Pubaev and Bolsokhoeva 1981; Nimayev 1983, 1988; Okladnikov 1937, 1976, 1979; Potapov 1978; Rumyantsev 1962; Tsibiktarov 2001; and Yegunov 1984. The works that were published before the collapse of socialism convey the Soviet methodology, which concentrates on the study of "ethnogenesis" (ethnic origins and establishment of the Buryats as a group with a distinctive ethnic, cultural, and racial identity) and of Buryat culture in an essentialist way. The works published after 1990 concern the violence inflicted by the Czarist government and Soviet oppression, interethnic connections, and the migration of Buryats through the Inner Asian plateau. Because the Buryat lands were taken by Czarist Russia and later by the Soviets, the pre-1990 works argue that the Buryats and the rest of the Mongols are ethnically and linguistically unrelated and emphasize Buryat rivalries with other Mongol groups. The postsocialist works point to the relative peace between Buryats and other Mongols but do not confront the previous works directly.

4. Buddhism has flourished in Mongolia since the 17th century; by the early 20th century, it had become the country's ideological center, also concentrating most of its economic capital. Shamanism has remained at the margins. The Buryats adopted Buddhism as a way of belonging to the Mongolian state, but through shamanism, they maintain their genealogical records, connect with their pasts, and reestablish their social and kin relations. Within shamanism, the Buryats distinguish "white" and "black" branches. The white branch is based on the propitiation of origin spirits of shamans who became Buddhist lamas and those of shaman-healers. The black branch is based on the propitiation of black origin spirits for the purposes of protection, deflection, and saving souls. Black spirits are militant, aggressive, and quick (see also Heissig 1980).

5. I refer here to an absence of anxiety about basic material needs that ensured economic survival. Although most people were poor by Western standards, starvation became a problem only after the collapse of socialism. That does not mean that Mongolia under socialism was a society free of anxiety. Most people lived in fear of the state.

6. The initial organization of the state and collective farms that began in the 1930s was a violent and forced act that met with well-organized, continuous resistance in different parts of Mongolia. The resistance movements were brutally demolished by the state, although they halted the initial attempts at collectivization, which was not tried again until the 1950s. Private property was confiscated and put into a communal pot. By the 1970s and 1980s, people's basic material needs were largely taken care of on a more or less homogeneous basis by the state.

7. The Mongolian socialist state had created an illusion of itself as a powerful entity, similar to the Venezuelan state Fernando Coronil (1997) describes as a "magnanimous sorcerer" that "seizes its population." In reality, the Mongolian state was a weak and disorganized

institution, like the Chinese state discussed by Anagnost 1997 and Mueggler 2001.

8. A wealth of material has appeared in the Mongolian media since 1990 on Mongolia's debt to the Soviet Union. Most of the material speculates on the ways in which the Soviets calculated their loans and aid to Mongolia. In his memoirs, former Mongolian president Ochirbat (1996) describes how it was impossible to get an accounting of the Soviet ways of calculating loans to other socialist countries. On one occasion, he was able to get a glimpse of Soviet economists' calculation of loans to Cuba and realized that the so-called friendly help was not as friendly as described. For details about the relationship between the ruling elites of Mongolia and Moscow and related political complications, see Bulag 1998.

9. The Mongolian prime minister at that time, Baymabasuren Dashin, reported this important information in a July 9, 2006, interview broadcast on national public television. He was the main person orchestrating the changes in the economy and was the first Mongolian to travel to the World Bank to request aid and to make a phone call to and visit the president of the United States.

10. The new democratic government, under neoliberal influence, claimed that the shock therapy would cause people to hit bottom all at once and then recover fast. The policy was implemented quickly so that the country would not revert back to socialism. For a critique of the newly imposed neoliberal systems, see Sneath 2002 and Rossabi 2005.

11. For a complete analysis of socialist state farms and life in a state-farm-based town, see Humphrey 1983. For detailed research on the mechanization and modernization of pastoralism during socialism and on reduced mechanization after the dismantling of the state farms and its effect on nomads, see Sneath 1999.

12. For a historical perspective on Mongolian notions of the market, see Wheeler 2004.

13. There were large harvests in some years, but they were the exceptions. Mongolia continued to "develop" agriculture because the Soviet subsidies supported it and because many officials hoped that once it was developed enough, it would yield profits.

Mongolian and international economists, consultants, and other professionals told me that agriculture, especially wheat growing, had hardly ever been profitable in Mongolia. Mongolian wheat had never been used for human consumption but only to feed livestock in Mongolia or in Russia. Mongols bought the wheat they used for food from Russia.

14. Daphne Berdahl (1999) argues that the socialist East German state maintained its power by withholding information from its citizens. In the Mongolian case, Berdahl's argument can be extended to the economic sphere; the state withheld economic information to create an illusion of wealth.

15. In 1993, the Mongol government sought and received a 300-million-yen loan from international donors to purchase flour from China (Rossabi n.d.). In January and February of 1996, it imported 3,600 tons of flour and 251 tons of rice (Rossabi n.d.). By February of 1997, Mongolia was so dependent on imports that it reduced by 50 percent the tax on imported flour (Rossabi n.d.). With the elimination of customs duties on May 1, 1997, imports of Chinese flour increased (Rossabi n.d.). By the end of the year, 40 to 60 percent of Mongolia's rice, flour, and sugar were imported from China (Rossabi n.d.).

16. During socialism, knowledge of state violence was suppressed. Any research related to the subject was strictly prohibited. Among several important works published since 1990, the most comprehensive ones are by Rinchin M. (2000) and Sukhbaatar (1997). Nevertheless, research on state violence has been underfunded and was resisted by certain influential individuals. Researchers have been blamed for "bringing up the past that no longer

matters," "seeking careers by digging the corpse," "taking advantage of people's mistakes," and so on. Although such resistance to dealing with the past needs further research, my findings suggest that the resistance to revealing the state violence comes from people who were directly and indirectly related to the perpetrators. In addition, the victims are afraid that their children might become stigmatized. Some people are also nostalgic about socialism and have protective feelings about the positive parts of their history. Most people seem to prefer to commemorate the victims of violence in an official way (from a distance) but not to be reminded of the details of the violence.

17. As noted, shamans were among the victims of the violence. Shamanism in Mongolia has a long history of persecution, alteration, and "dissolution" by Buddhism dating back to the 17th century. The Buryats of Bayan-Uul constitute a kind of a shamanic enclave as a result of their mobility between Siberia and Mongolia to escape Buddhist missionaries from the south and Christian missionaries from Russia. For accounts on religion in Mongolia, see Heissig 1980 and Zhukovskaya 1991; for an account of an English missionary among the Buryats, see Bawden 1985; for an account by a diplomat, traveler, and amateur ethnographer, see Curtin 1908, 1909. I thank Professor James Bosson, who brought the books by Curtin to my attention.

18. On the Buryats' marginalization within Mongolia after their flight from Russia to escape the Bolshevik Revolution, see Bulag 1998 and Baabar 1996.

19. Pigg (1996) has argued that, among villagers in Nepal, skepticism toward shamans is a way to assert one's modernity. The Buryat Mongols also deny their belief in the existence or power of spirits to assert their more sophisticated upbringing.

20. Three older shamans who lived in Bayan-Uul through the 1990s were largely regarded as authentic. In this article, I concentrate mainly on the discourse that emerged around shamans who were initiated and began their practice after the collapse of socialism.

21. The shamans' argument illustrates the points made by Humphrey (1979), who describes how Khori Buryats' genealogies were manipulated to "fit" the socialist political order and maintain the more sedentary population's access to land.

22. Not surprisingly, on a larger scale, men dominate the most profitable private spheres in the country's economy (like mining and freight trading), whereas women remain in low-paid (although sometimes high-prestige) jobs in the government, in (often marginalized) nonprofits, and in the entry-level service sector.

23. Boorshi is one of Chingis Khan's warriors depicted in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (Kahn 1998), which chronicles Chingis Khan's genealogy, biography, and conquests.

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Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn
Society of Fellows
Harvard University
78 Mount Auburn Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
buyandel@fas.harvard.edu