Etnografia. Praktyki, Teorie, Doświadczenia 2024, 10: 29–43
https://doi.org/10.26881/etno.2024.10.02

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The revitalisation of Mongolian shamanism: Tradition, restitution, new approaches

Introduction

Buddhism, which spread among the Mongols during three distinct periods in their history, is regarded as a traditional religion (*ulamjlalt*), while shamanism, revered by them since ancient times, is considered their core religion (*yazguur*). According to prominent Mongolian historians, the shamanic practices of the ancient Mongols reached their peak during the Xiongnu period (3rd century BCE–1st century CE), attaining the status of a state religion (Pürev 2009: 40; Sükhbaatar 1980: 75).[1] During this time, as Otgony Pürev states, shamanic beliefs and rituals were refined, becoming both a fundamental pillar of the state and a key force supporting and sanctifying governance. Shamanism retained this character in subsequent states of Xianbei (Sianbi) (1st–3rd century CE), Rouran (Nirun) (4th–6th century CE), and Khitan (916–1125 CE), maintaining its status until the Mongol Empire in the 13th century (Pürev 2009: 28). However, it gradually lost much of its original character due to the influence of Buddhism, which became widespread among the Mongols in the latter half of the 16th century.

[1] Although this claim is generally not supported by non-Mongolian scholars, it is important to consider the local dimension of historical narratives, where the criteria for both statehood and state religion are rooted in unique, indigenous concepts. Mongolian historians argue that the key patterns of nomadic states and legislative institutions originated during the Xiongnu period and were subsequently passed down to later states that emerged in the territories of what is now Mongolia. The concepts of the state or government itself (*tör*) and the categories of state rituals (*töriin yos*) are particularly significant, leading Mongolian historians to classify the involvement of shamans in state rituals as a form of state religion.

Over the course of the following centuries, shamanism gradually diminished. By the 1930s and 1940s, during the anti-religious campaigns in the Mongolian People's Republic, it was ultimately marginalised. The Democratic Revolution of 1989–1990 granted the Mongolian people freedom of belief and worship, a right enshrined in the new Constitution of 1992, which laid the foundation for the reawakening of Mongolian shamanism.

This revitalisation began to gain momentum naturally, once the legal and institutional framework supporting freedom of thought and belief for citizens had been established. The strong sense of national pride and the presumptuous belief that Mongols are the greatest nation, with almost everything originating from Mongolia, have gradually subsided over time. Only recently, Mongols started to take a more credible perspective and assess the situation more pragmatically.

The revival of Mongolian shamanism was no exception. Ippei Shimamura, a Japanese researcher of Mongolian shamanism, described the early revitalization phase as the "shamanic pandemic" (Shimamura 2016: 5). The peak of this "pandemic" has passed and Mongolian shamanism can now be examined within the broader global context of shamanism while still retaining its distinct local characteristics. The revitalization of Mongolian shamanism is a unique phenomenon that bridges the past and the present. What makes it particularly compelling is how this once-declining, nearly extinct indigenous religion is now being integrated with modern religious and cultural trends.

While numerous scholars, both Mongolian and foreign, have studied Mongolian shamanism as a religious and cultural phenomenon, this article focuses on reviewing the research of Mongolian scholars, which forms the foundation of local knowledge about shamanism. It is based on printed sources published since 1957, including books written and published by shamans themselves.

The first scholars in Mongolia to research Mongolian shamanism were Byambyn Rinchen (1905–1977) and Tsendiin Damdinsüren (1908–1986). Byambyn Rinchen began his research on Mongolian shamanism in 1927, and his first research materials, interviews with shamans and chants were published in France and Germany (1959, 1961, 1975), and also in Poland (1972). Tsendiin Damdinsuren in the first volume of his book (*Mongolyn uran zokhiolyn toim*; A Review of Mongolian Literature, 1957) mentioned the names of several written sources on Mongolian shamanism and quoted from some of them, which makes him one of the pioneers in bringing shamanic topics into scholarly research. In 1959, historian Chuluuny Dalai (1930–2009) published his monograph *Mongolyn böö mörgöliin tovch tüükh* (A Brief History of Mongolian Shamanism), which was one of the early works on the subject. Renowned linguist Baldangiin Sodnom (1908–1979) wrote an article titled *Mongolyn kharyn böögiin duudlagyn tukhai* (On the Invocations of Mongolian Black Shamanism, 1962), while ethnographer Sandagsürengiin Badamkhatan (1933–1998) addressed shamanism in his works *Khövsgöliin tsaatan ardyn aj baidlyn toim* (An Overview of the Lifestyle of the Tsaatan People of Khövsgöl, 1962) and *Khövsgöliin Darkhad yastan* (The Darkhad People of Khövsgöl, 1965). Historian Günjiin Sükhbaatar (1928–1995) also touched on shamanic issues in his work

Mongolchuudyn ertnii övög: Hünnü naryn aj akhui, niigmiin baiguulal, soyol, ugsaa garval (The Ancient Ancestors of the Mongols: The Economy, Social Organization, Culture, and Genealogy of the Xiongnu people, 1980). Thus, between 1957 and 1990, during the socialist period, only a few scholarly works on shamanism were published by Mongolian scholars.

Upon the revival of shamanic traditions in Mongolia in the 1990s, the first major work published on this topic was Sendenjavyn Dulam's *Darkhad böögiin ulamjlal* (The Tradition of Darkhad Shamans, 1992). Since then, the number of people interested in and researching Mongolian shamanism has grown, and their works can be categorized into two main types: scholarly works using research methods and popular publications. For example, Dulamyn Bum-Ochir and Buyandelgeriin Mandukhai are internationally recognized Mongolian anthropologists, while others, from various professional backgrounds, have conducted research and published works on the topic independently, like physicists and philosophers Zulaagiin Bat-Otgon (2011; 2014) and Oidovyn Lhagva (2013).

A notable development in shamanic studies during the revival of Mongolian shamanism was the publication of key reference works published in Mongolian: *Mongol böögijn shashny ner tom'iony tailbar tol'* (A Glossary of Mongolian Shamanic Terms, Pürev 2003), *Mongol böögiin delgerengüi tol'* (A Detailed Dictionary of Mongolian Shamanism, Sükhbat 2010) and *Mongol böö mörgöliin tailbar tol'* (A Glossary of Mongolian Shamanism, Khishigsüren 2023), in both Mongolian and English. The current body of research is sufficient to provide comprehensive answers to questions such as why Mongolian shamanism declined over several centuries, what factors contributed to its rapid revival, what the role of tradition and innovation in this revival process is, and how successful Mongolian shamanism studies are at the local level. As someone who has closely observed the development of Mongolian shamanism since 1993 and has been regularly publishing on the topic since 2005, I will attempt to address these questions based on my studies.[2]

The historical reasons behind the decline of Mongolian shamanism

By the 1990s, only about ten shamans were publicly known in Mongolia, primarily among the Darkhad and Tsaatan ethnic groups of the taiga region in northwest Mongolia and the Buryats in the eastern Dornod province. At that time, Mongols had mostly negative perceptions of shamanism and were reluctant to engage with shamans; an attitude shaped by historical circumstances. To understand the revival of Mongolian shamanism, it is essential to first examine the historical factors that led to its decline.

[2] In my monograph *Mongolchuudyn Tenger üzel, Tenger shütleg* (The Mongols' Heaven Worldview and Heaven Worship, 2021), I undertake a comprehensive examination of the historical development and philosophical foundations of Mongolian shamanism, as well as its contemporary revitalization.

As mentioned earlier, a popular viewpoint in Mongolian historiography suggests that shamanism reached its peak during the Xiongnu era, when it evolved into a state religion. This tradition persisted into the 13th century when the Mongols rose to prominence on the global stage. The first four so-called Great Khans of the Mongol Empire: Chinggis, Ögöödei, Mönkh, and Güyüg – as the historian Otgony Pürev wrote – integrated shamanic rituals into state ceremonies and governance, relying on shamanism as the core ideological foundation (2009: 60). Sharavyn Bira also noted that, during the early formation of the Mongol state, shamanism rooted in the worship of the Eternal Blue Heaven (*Mönkh Khökh Tenger*) shaped much of the nomadic people's worldview and philosophy (2011). The authors of the five-volume history of the Mongol Empire further emphasize: "Chinggis Khan skilfully employed shamanic worship as a central pillar of state policy in unifying the Mongol people, making it the official religion of the state" (Batsüren et al. 2019: 697). However, this shamanic tradition began to decline during the rule of Chinggis Khan's descendants. As Bira shows, the first significant departure occurred under the reign of Khodan Noyon (1206–1247/1251), who ruled over Tibet, Gansu, and the Khökh Nuur (Qinghai) regions. He abandoned shamanism in favour of Buddhism, establishing it as the official religion in his territories. Later, Kublai Khan, the founder of the Yuan Dynasty, initially showed interest in Chinese Daoism but eventually adopted Tibetan Buddhism, influenced by the relations established by Khodan. In 1264, Kublai issued a decree stating: "'We shall follow the teachings of the Buddha rather than the ways of Chinggis Khan's *Tenger* worship.' He formally adopted the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism as the state religion and appointed the Tibetan monk Pagba (1235–1280) as the Imperial Preceptor and teacher of the Yuan Dynasty" (Bira 2015: 145). This shift marked the beginning of the decline of shamanism as a state ideology, as Buddhism became increasingly dominant under the subsequent Mongol rulers.

Kublai's decree did not, however, result in the immediate rejection of shamanism by all the Mongols. Lama Pagba spread Buddhism at the Yuan dynasty's royal court (Sodbileg 2010: 419), and the religion indeed became increasingly popular among the Mongol aristocracy (Sodbileg 2019: 322). One example of this is the Buddhist deity Mahakala (Hevajra), which Lama Pagba initially dedicated to Kublai Khan. Over time, it gradually became a devotional icon for the Yuan aristocracy (Sodbileg 2019: 318). Thereby, Buddhism emerged as a significant instrument of state policy during the Yuan dynasty, serving both the royal court and the social elite. Nevertheless, the Yuan emperors did not discriminate against any religion and even implemented a religious policy that "granted freedoms that had never been experienced before and were previously impossible to obtain" (Sodbileg 2019: 311). It is clear that, under these circumstances, the majority of common Mongols in their native lands continued to adhere to their ancestral shamanism.

This situation continued until the last emperor of the Great Yuan dynasty, Togoon Tömör, was driven out of Beijing and returned to his native Mongol lands in 1370. After the fall of the Yuan dynasty, Mongols increasingly embraced shamanism and gradually distanced themselves from Buddhism (Sodbileg 2010: 419).

Therefore, between 1370 and 1578, Buddhism ceased to be the state religion, and shamanic influence was revived. Especially in the heartland of the Mongol state, which today forms the territory of Mongolia, shamanism remained influential until the mid-17th century. During this transitional period, some of the so-called "minor khans" (*baga khaad*) in Mongolia adhered to shamanic beliefs, while others embraced Buddhist practices, and some did not take a clear stance at all (Pürev 2009: 52).

In 1577, Altan Khan of the Tümed, based in what is now Inner Mongolia in China, and in 1587, Abtai Sain Khan, one of the four khans who divided and ruled the territory of present-day Mongolia, each issued decrees to introduce Tibetan Buddhism in their respective domains. These events marked the beginning of the decline of shamanism. Altan Khan enacted laws that included provisions such as burning shamanic *ongons* (shaman-made physical representations of the guarding spirits), replacing them with Buddhist deity Mahakala, and imposing fines in livestock on those who pursued shamanic rituals. This marked the first state-driven efforts to suppress shamanism through legal means. The "Great Code" adopted at the 1640 Khalkha-Oirat assembly provided for the confiscation of horses from those who practiced shamanic rituals (Erkhembayar 2021: 70). Similarly, the legal code approved at the 1685 Qinghai assembly sanctioned beating and plundering in respect of shamans performing rituals in households. It also permitted the seizure of *ongons* and horses from individuals. "If they resisted surrendering their *ongons*, a fine of nine items was prescribed" (Erkhembayar 2021: 39).

A law was also enacted requiring households with three or more sons to dedicate at least one son to becoming a Buddhist lama, while children of shamans were actively encouraged and supported to join the Buddhist clergy (Pürev 2009: 55, 57). Through successive laws, Buddhism's supremacy was firmly established, and the legal foundation for the suppression and eradication of shamanism was laid by the state. As a result, Mongolian shamanism was reduced to merely symbolic existence. Simultaneously with the implementation of the above state policies, Buddhist practitioners sought to attract Mongolian people's allegiance by incorporating certain shamanic rituals, such as mountain and fire worship ceremonies, into their own practices (Dalai 2009: 71). They introduced Buddhist elements like the chant *om mani padme hum* or *um pad hum* into the opening of shamanic invocations (Sodnom 2008/2009: 127), and translated or transcribed the shamanic texts into Tibetan (Rinchen 2015a). This synthesis reflected a mutual adaptation of the two traditions. As Tsendiin Damdinsüren concluded: "Buddhism, as it spread in Mongolia, acquired a highly distinctive character, essentially transforming into a composite fusion of Buddhism and shamanism" (2017: 160).

When the Mongols became subjects of the Qing Dynasty in 1691, shamanism's influence declined even further. By the time Mongolia declared independence in 1911, the Buddhist leader Javzandamba Khutagt (Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu) was enthroned as the absolute ruler, wielding both religious and political authority. At this point, shamanism had virtually no influence among the Mongols.

Later, during the People's Revolution of 1921 and the establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic, atheistic policies were imposed on the population. These policies rejected all forms of religious belief and ideology and persisted until 1990. As a result, the Mongols developed a significantly fragmented understanding of their shamanic tradition.

The revival of Mongolian shamanism

Starting in the 1990s, as state control over religion diminished, individuals with a predisposition to become shamans began connecting with their guardian spirits (*ongod*) and adopting shamanic practices. They relied on the few remaining shamans in Mongolia's remote regions. At the time, structured sources of knowledge about shamanism were unavailable to most Mongols. Information was primarily passed down orally, often carrying negative connotations, which created psychological pressure for those seeking to become shamans. Nonetheless, many were compelled to embrace shamanism due to the experience of "shamanic illness" (*böögiin övchin*), a condition believed to be resolved only by becoming a shaman.[3] People who became shamans often recovered from illnesses that had been unsuccessfully treated by modern medicine. The divination and healing skills of shamanic spirits also attracted significant public attention, leading to a rapid increase in the number of followers and practitioners. By 1994, 2% of Mongolia's religious adherents – approximately 55,000 people – identified as shamanists (Altaibaatar 2012: 139).

Centuries of suppression have led to the destruction of few available written texts and scriptures on Mongolian shamanism, leaving oral tradition as the primary means of transmitting knowledge. The records of aforementioned scholars such as Byambyn Rinchen, Chuluuny Dalai, Baldangiin Sodnom, Sandagsürengiin Badamkhatan, and Tsendiin Damdinsüren, who documented aspects of shamanism in their works, became the fundamental source of knowledge about shamanism during its early revival period. In particular, Otgony Pürev's book *Mongol böögiin shashin* (Mongol Shamanic Religion, 1998) served as a basic textbook for shamans and has been reprinted multiple times since its publication. In 1990, the shaman Tseren Zairan, who lived in Bayan-Uul sum of Dornod Province in eastern Mongolia, established a central shamanic organization. From 1991 onward, this organization was formally named The Blue Temple of Heaven (*Tengeriin Khökh Süm*) (Enkhbaatar 2013: 10) and began conducting regular activities, becoming a new centre for shamanic initiation and training.

The Mongolian Shamanic Golomt Centre, which provides services to both the public and aspiring shamans, was established in May 1996 in Ulaanbaatar at the initiative of shamanism researcher Shagdarjavyn Sükhbat. The centre brought

[3] It should be emphasized that in this context, the concept of shamanic illness as a pathology or mental disorder, as known from European descriptions of shamanism, is absent.

together shamans representing various ethnic groups across Mongolia and used their expertise to initiate and train new shamans while offering shamanic services. This development marked a significant step in relocating the epicentre of Mongolian shamanism to the capital city. The geographical characteristic of the revival of Mongolian shamanism lies in its dual origins from two remote areas: Khövsgöl and Dornod provinces. From these regions, shamanism spread across the entire territory of Mongolia. For instance, in 2003, under the initiative of Tseren Zairan, 126 shamans gathered in Ulaanbaatar to establish a non-governmental organization named The Spirit of Heaven Association (*Tengeriin Sülder Association*) and held its first congress. This event further encouraged the unification and organization of Mongolian shamans.

As Japanese Mongolist Ippei Shimamura observed,

> the late 1990s and early 2000s were a period when Mongolia, and particularly its shamanic traditions, captured the interest and stirred the imagination of global social and cultural anthropologists. At that time, Mongolia could be regarded as the focal point of global shamanism studies within anthropology (2016: 5).

It is true that the first 20 years of the revival of Mongolian shamanism can be characterized as a chaotic phase, during which it faced numerous challenges. Over time, certain practices became commercialized, with shamanic rituals being used as a means of generating income. Some individuals engaged in unethical practices, such as intimidating others or demanding money under the guise of offerings to shamanic spirits. By the 2010s, such behaviours had severely damaged the reputation of shamanism in the society. This deterioration of public perception became a matter of concern at the governmental level. In 2012, during an interview, Mongolian President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, when asked: "Shamanism is in trouble. Every household and apartment seems to have a shaman. Should any measures be taken?," responded: "That's true. We are discussing it. It might be appropriate to start by prohibiting the initiation of new shamans" (News.mn 2012).

Thus, this period could be considered the peak of disorganized, obscure, and extreme developments in shamanism. By the mid-2010s, however, this chaotic state began to gradually subside, and the revival of Mongolian shamanism entered a phase of stabilization. In 2012, the representatives of Mongolian shamans and organizations practicing shamanism established an organization called The Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans (*Mongolyn böögiin negdsen evlel*).[4] This marked the first attempt to create a unified national organization for shamans. The organization continues to operate today and claims to have a registered membership of 4,000 shamans. However, during research, it was frequently reported that shamans who withdrew from the union and formed separate non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were not removed from the membership registry, so the actual number of members is doubtful.

[4] The registration data is provided by Opendata Lab Mongolia (2025).

As of 2023, Mongolia had fourteen officially registered centres dedicated to shamanism, along with over a hundred NGOs operating under names such as associations, unions, and societies that focus on shamanic practices (Tsedendamba et al. 2023: 171–172). In fact, the total number of shamans in Mongolia remains uncertain, as no comprehensive study has been conducted in this regard. The Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans claims there are 20,000 shamans nationwide, but this figure is widely regarded as exaggerated. Most organizations involved in shamanic activities estimate the actual number of shamans to be around 5,000.[5]

In terms of religious adherence, shamanism ranks second after Buddhism in Mongolia. According to the 2010 population and housing census, 4.7% of the religious adherents aged 15 and above identified as adherents of shamanism (Tuv.nso.mn 2010). By 2020, this figure had slightly decreased to 4.2% (1212.mn 2020a), while in Ulaanbaatar, the capital, 5.4% of religious adherents identified with shamanism (1212.mn 2020b).

According to sociological studies conducted by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy between 2005 and 2012, 17.9% of all religious adherents identified with shamanism. Meanwhile, the 2015–2017 foundational research project "Religious Conditions in Mongolia" reported that 11.8% of adherents followed shamanism.[6] A joint study by Russian and Mongolian researchers in 2016 found that 18.1% of religious followers practiced shamanism, while a 2013 study by the National University of Mongolia estimated this figure at 10%. Based on these studies, the percentage of shamans among Mongolia's religious adherents ranges from 4.3% to 18.1%, which translates to between 56,000 and 238,000 individuals.[7] It is worth mentioning another statistic here. According to research by the Mongolian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy, Mongolian shamanism has become the fastest-growing religion in the country over the past 20 years and 63.3% of shamanic adherents are young people between the ages of 15 and 34 (Tsedendamba et al. 2023: 166–167). Exploratory interviews with shamans have revealed that many individuals simultaneously practice both Buddhism and shamanism. Furthermore, Christians and followers of other religions also frequently seek the services of shamans, suggesting a need for specialized research on this phenomenon.

Regarding the debate on whether Mongolian shamanism qualifies as a religion, this controversy is more actively discussed among shamans than among scholars. Shamans who argue that Mongolian shamanism, or Heaven worship (*Tenger shütleg*), is not a religion offer divergent explanations. On the other hand, those who believe it is a religion base their stance on historical evidence, such as its role as a state religion during the Mongol Empire and its designation as a "black religion" by 19th-century authors on Mongolian shamanism, like Dorj Banzarov.

5 Based on author's own calculation.

6 Data from the interview with one of the project members, Borbandi Mönkhtsatsralt (Ikon.mn 2018).

7 Based on author's own calculation.

From the religious studies perspective, there are similarly opposing views, though their arguments differ from those of the shamans. Scholars who do not consider Mongolian shamanism a religion emphasize that it was not founded by an enlightened individual and lacks a comprehensive set of teachings, written scriptures, formal institutions, temples, or a standardized training system for practitioners. They also note that shamans acquire most of their knowledge through interactions with spiritual entities, whereas in other religions, such knowledge typically emerges from a prolonged practice and is accessible only to a select few (Bat-Otgon 2011: 18–23).

Those who argue that shamanism is a religion provide the following explanations: Mongolian shamanism once had a comprehensive set of teachings, but due to centuries of suppression by the combined forces of the Mongolian state and Buddhism, these teachings were preserved under the names "folk teachings" (*ardyn surgaal'*) or "folk wisdom" (*ardyn ukhaan*). In shamanic practice, when a shaman performs rituals at home, their household becomes their temple; when they perform outdoors, nature itself serves as their sacred space. Additionally, they argue that the shaman's practice of learning by consulting their guardian spirits represents a unique form of education, rather than an absence of training altogether (Pürev 2009: 7–8).

Over the past three decades, researchers and assistants to shamans have documented information from shamanic spirits, compiled books and pamphlets based on interviews with shamans and transcriptions of *ongods'* messages, and compared these findings with studies conducted by Mongolian scholars across different time periods (Badarch 2014: 181; Galaarid 2020: 296). Furthermore, the transformation observed in contemporary Mongolian shamanic practices provides additional evidence for considering Mongolian shamanism a religion.

The notion that Mongolian shamanism was a primitive religion lacking written teachings originates from anti-religious propaganda during the socialist era. However, Mongolian scholars have consistently argued that written texts and scriptures once existed but were destroyed. For instance, the renowned scholar Byambyn Rinchen noted that during the final wave of Buddhism in the 16th century, influential Buddhist lamas within the courts of Mongolian khans and nobles actively supported the destruction of valuable manuscripts on Mongolian shamanism that had been preserved across generations in the personal collections of khans, princes, and ordinary clans. Rinchen wrote: "In the Buddhist literature of the 16th to 19th centuries written in Mongolian, there are numerous mentions of the large-scale burning of sacred images, manuscripts, and other materials associated with Northern and Southern Mongolian shamanism" (2015b: 419). He also detailed over ten titles of manuscripts and scriptures related to Mongolian shamanism that he had discovered and utilized in his research. Unfortunately, these original texts were lost during the socialist years. However, there is evidence supported by information from shamanic spirits, who, during rituals, share stories about their time as human beings and confirm various historical facts mentioned above.

This historical destruction underscores the systematic eradication of shamanic written knowledge, further emphasizing the richness of Mongolian shamanism as a belief system rather than a "primitive" practice. Places referred to as Ongod's Palace (*Ongodyn Örgöö*) and Effigy's Palace (*Shüteenii Örgöö*), where shamanic activities are conducted, have emerged in large numbers. A teacher-centred apprentice training system has taken shape, and Mongolian shamanism is beginning to institutionalize as a whole. The notion that only uneducated people become shamans has not been proven true in practice. For instance, The Palace of Light (*Gerliin Örgöö*) group, established in 2012, has 147 shaman members, 132 of whom have attained higher education either domestically or abroad as of 2024. Since its founding, under the leadership of the female shaman Ayangat Udgan, the group has been compiling shamanic spiritual messages into a series of books, which now total 40 volumes.[8]

The current state of shamanism studies in Mongolia: New concepts and trends

The revival of Mongolian shamanism is a comprehensive phenomenon that can be analysed through the lens of three notable features:

1. The call of ancestry and the search for meaning and cause.
2. The wave of false shamans.
3. The distinction between truth and falsehood (or the issue of credibility).

The first characteristic, known as the call of ancestry, pertains to genealogical matters. In Mongolian tradition, a person afflicted with shamanic illness is referred to as someone with "a call for their lineage" (*udmyn nekheltei khün*). As Sendenjavyn Dulam notes, there is a specific term for this condition: *böögiin khiiren* (2018: 421). This concept is deeply tied to the belief in different kinds of spirits within Mongolian shamanism. According to these beliefs, an individual possesses three types of spirits: the spirit of the blood (*tsusny süns*), the spirit of the bones (*yasny süns*), and the spirit of the intellect (*oyun sanaany süns*). The first two spirits perish with the body and bones after death. However, the third – the intellectual one – is eternal. These intellectual spirits of the deceased continue to exist and exert influence over their descendants. They are believed to protect and strengthen the lineage or rectify wrongdoings committed by their ancestors by inhabiting the bodies of newborn children. A child born with a special spiritual mark is destined to become a shaman when the time comes.

The second characteristic, the surge of fake shamans, is a phenomenon that emerged at the beginning of the revival of Mongolian shamanism. The term "fake shaman creation" (*khuuramch böö törüülekh*) refers to the people who, either accidentally or intentionally, are made into shamans despite having no innate ability for it. An error occurs when a shaman fails to carefully assess whether

[8] Some of them are available as audiobooks on the Internet, see: (M-book).

an individual has the spiritual calling to become a shaman. Mongolian shamans typically determine this by tracing the person's genealogy with the help of spirits. If it is true that a person is meant to become a shaman, it is determined which ancestor's spirit, from which generation, will descend upon their lineage as a spirit guide. When mistakes occur during this process, it could be referred to as a "professional error." Sometimes people are made into shamans for financial gain or personal interests, which is seen as fraudulent behaviour. In such cases, shamans deceive people by claiming to link them with *ongods* when, in fact, no legitimate spiritual connection is being made. Furthermore, some individuals may become influenced during shamanic rituals. People who are easily influenced by others, such as when dancing to a drumbeat for a long time or drinking alcohol, tend to enter a trance state more quickly. Fraudsters take advantage of this weakness and "create shamans," calling it "attaching any spirit to them" (*yamar ch khamaagüi ongo naakh*). Such activities are considered harmful practices in Mongolian shamanism.

Another related concept is that of "wandering spirits" (*tenemel süns*) or "stray spirits" (*zolbin süns*). These spirits, referred to as *borool*, linger in the human world, unable to find a proper resting place among the deceased. Fraudulent practitioners exploit these wandering spirits in their rituals, deceiving people into believing they are in contact with a guardian spirit and that they have been chosen as shamans. However, as knowledge of shamanism becomes more widespread, people are increasingly able to distinguish between genuine shamans and imposters, mitigating the influence of such deceitful practices.

The third characteristic, the distinction between truth and falsehood, is becoming increasingly prominent in Mongolian shamanism. While Mongolian shamanism had developed into a well-established system over a long historical period, it then weakened and became powerless due to the policies of the ruling state regarding religion in the past. Consequently, the teachings and doctrines were forgotten and misrepresented as false ideologies, resulting in the shamanistic practices being lost for several centuries. As a result, false information about shamanism became deeply ingrained in public awareness, as mentioned earlier. However, in recent times, there has been a turning point in Mongolian history, traditional culture, and religious studies. Research on shamanism has expanded, and the revival of shamanic practices has led to the reemergence of forgotten ancient knowledge. This process has contributed to better distinction between what is true and what is false in relation to Mongolian shamanism.

As Mongolian shamanism is reawakening, new developments are emerging alongside the preservation of traditions. Some of these developments include the following aspects. Firstly, the decline of "guiding" (*zamchlakh*) and rise of "teaching" (*bagshlakh*): traditionally, determining whether someone was destined to be a shaman and connecting them to their guardian spirit through specific rituals was called *guiding*. Once properly connected to their *ongods*, the individual would follow the spirit's guidance, only occasionally seeking advice from the shaman who had guided them. However, this tradition is fading. Now, the shaman who facilitates the connection is called a "teacher" (*bagsh*), and the new shaman performs

rituals and practices under the teacher's guidance, often collaborating closely. This has become a widespread and institutionalized practice.

Secondly, formation of shamanic groups or centres: teachers now form groups of disciples, referred to as "shamanic centres" (*böögiin gal*). Since officially registering as a religious organization is challenging in Mongolia, these groups often establish themselves as NGOs, choosing either an open or a closed model. These centres' members intensely participate in social activities by conducting collective rituals, organizing environmental protection protests and charitable events, or hosting shamanic festivals.

Thirdly, it is a new phenomenon that, in recent years, increasing attention has been given to the ethical issues of shamanism, with open discussions taking place. Furthermore, the revival of the ancient practice in which a person intending to become a shaman must take a solemn vow, offering their body and lineage as a pledge, and then be connected with their guardian spirits, essentially means that shamanism now has its own ethical code.

Fourthly, the shamanic spirits, which specialize in divination, healing, transmitting ancestral histories, teachings, legends, and ancient knowledge, are creatively used to accumulate long-forgotten knowledge. This phenomenon could be referred to as "the extraction of traditional knowledge" (*ulamjlalt medlegiin olborlolt*).

Fifthly, advancements in information and communication technologies have been introduced into Mongolian shamanic practices. New forms are developing, such as documenting *ongods'* messages in audio and video formats, shamans debating on online platforms, creating open and closed groups for information exchange, and providing online services.

Sixthly, changes are occurring in shamanic terminology. For instance, as already mentioned, the term "guide" (*zamch*), which was previously used to refer to a shaman who initiates others into shamanism, is now commonly replaced by "teacher" (*bagsh*). Similarly, while female shamans were traditionally called *udgan* and male shamans *zairan*, with the general term *böö* (shaman) used for both, a shift toward the universal term *ulaach* (mediator) is becoming standard practice.

Seventhly, significant changes are taking place in the design and form of shamanic tools, attire, and sacred effigies. In the past, the clothing and accessories of shamans reflected their lineage and ethnic group. However, contemporary shamans' attire and armour now tend to indicate the teacher they trained under, while also incorporating more modern and stylish elements. Additionally, the traditional design of home spirit-effigies (*ger-ongon*) has evolved, with these effigies now being crafted in various forms and styles using a wide range of materials.

These developments highlight the dynamic nature of modern Mongolian shamanism as it adapts to contemporary contexts while maintaining its deep cultural roots.

Conclusions

Amid the wave of globalization and the openness to various cultural influences, the revival and development of national culture, traditions, and indigenous beliefs in Mongolia reflect a unique aspect of the country's identity today. Notably, the resurgence of Mongolian shamanism represents a process of "reconstructing the present from the past," reviving a tradition that had nearly faded into history. This revival process overlaps with the modernization of shamanism, integrating it into contemporary contexts. In other words, Mongolian shamanism not only has successfully inherited the traditional rituals of the shamanic practices of ancient Mongol states, but also evolves as a religion adapting to modern times.

Simultaneously, phenomena that could be more aptly described as neo--shamanism are emerging, which warrants further in-depth study. The resurgence of Mongolian shamanism has transitioned from its initial chaotic phase in the mid-2010s to an increasingly structured and institutionalized religious and cultural phenomenon today.

Over the past 400 years, due to specific historical circumstances, shamanism in Mongolia experienced a continuous decline, nearly reaching extinction. However, in just three decades, this tradition has undergone a dramatic revival. The study and analysis of this unique and remarkable resurgence remains an open and significant area for scholarly exploration.

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SUMMARY

The revitalisation of Mongolian shamanism: Tradition, restitution, new approaches

Since the collapse of the socialist system in the past 30 years, Mongolia has transitioned from an atheist state to one where multiple religions – such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam – coexist freely, with no restrictions on freedom of belief. This transformation has also spurred the revival of shamanism, the indigenous religion of the Mongols. Despite its tragic history, Mongolian shamanism, shaped by unique local traditions, has shown a remarkable ability to re-emerge after a prolonged period of decline. The article aims to explore the factors behind the centuries-long decline of Mongolian shamanism, the influences that facilitated its revival, and the process of institutionalization it has undergone. Furthermore, it examines the emerging trends in the study of Mongolian shamanism and the interplay of traditional and innovative elements in its revival.

Keywords: Mongolian shamanism, revival of shamanism, Mongolian shamanism studies