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# Shamans study shamanism: The world in the podcasts of Mongolian shamans

## Introduction

Quite independently from the career of the concept of "shamanism" in the discourse of cultural anthropology and more broadly Western humanities, the Mongolian word *böö* (shaman), as well as the related *böö mörgöl* (shamanism) and *böögiin shashin* (shamanic religion), has had its own historical-political context in Mongolia (e.g. Dalai 1959; Pürev 1998; Bumochir 2014; Sükhbaatar 1980; Kollmar-Paulenz 2012). As the Mongolian shamans say, the phenomenon experienced times of rise and fall: periods of splendour when shamans were important enough to be consulted on state decisions in Chinggis Khan's Empire in the 13th century, and times of almost complete oblivion during the reign of communist ideology in Mongolia in the 20th century. In their opinion, there is a resurgence of shamanism taking place after four centuries of banishment and concealment, while scholars speak of an institutionalization of shamanism (Bumochir 2014; Bira 2006/2007; Galaarid in this volume).

Observing this process of shamanic revitalization, it is impossible not to notice that Mongolian shamans express a need to speak on their own behalf and an opposition to being a passive object of scientific research on shamanisms. This is made evident by the fact that the shamans themselves authored numerous publications in the Mongolian language over the last three decades. Noticeable is their heightened Internet activity, especially on social media, where one can find documentaries, reportages, talent shows with the participation of shamans, and most interestingly, podcasts directed by the shamans themselves. It should also be kept in mind that

Mongolian shamans are the protagonists of numerous anthropological studies, and interlocutors whom anthropologists encouraged to describe and define various concepts, phenomena or rituals.[1] Finally, as the shamans themselves note, they also participate in shamanistic conferences and visit various research centres on shamanism. So, on the one hand, they are to some extent open to scientific research, and on the other, they feel the need to supplement it with their own experience and knowledge of shamanism.

This activity of shamans can be seen as a form of gaining voice by the respondents in light of Edward Said's postcolonial critique, or the reflexive turn in anthropology in general, which emphasizes subjectivity and agency of the studied actors over the observation of a passive subject (Marcus 1995). Such gained voice of the researched in anthropology also opens up many other questions and problematic issues, such as the exclusion of non-Western historiography from academic categories (e.g. Spivak 1988; Asad 1993; Sahlin 1985; Szmyt 2022). Zbigniew Szmyt writes: "The idiosyncratic character of Inner Asian native regimes of historicity is due to the fact that 'history-tellers' may not only include living people but also the spirits of the deceased" (2020: 191). Piotr Sobkowiak's monograph on Buryat shamanism, built around the question "Do religious traditions not related to written texts have a history?," is also a significant contribution. In the book, he points to the phenomenon of shamanism in reference to the relation "between fact and fiction, history and literature, historiography and mythography" (Sobkowiak 2023). Such issues like alternative regimes of historicity, *mythopraxis*, and "taking seriously" local ontology are becoming increasingly important in reflections on the knowledge-making practice in anthropology as a scientific discipline. They also impact the discussion on the methodology of field research, which is why some researchers propose an ethnography that is increasingly sensitive to these issues. An example is Katherine Swancutt and Mireille Mazard, recommending the reflexive feedback loop method, as hyperreflective ethnography, following the reflexive, multi-sited ethnography of George Marcus. "This is a mode of anthropological transmission in which professional visitors – fieldworkers, missionaries, ideologues – transmit elements of their theoretical perspectives to native thinkers. These thinkers, in turn, offer anthropologizing perspectives back to us, indirectly reflecting the diverse ethnographic influences that shape anthropologists' views" (Swancutt, Mazard 2018: 3). Similarly, Agnieszka Halemba points to the emergence of the ontological turn in anthropology as a scientific methodology arising from the need for a better language of ethnographic description in situations where analytical tools are not adequate to the cultural realities described (Halemba 2022: 15). The ideal description should be, as it were, internal, levelling the subjectivity of the observer.

The article will refer to the propositions of the philosophically oriented anthropologists who attempt to break through the anthropocentric model of Western

[1] An extensive anthropological literature has been created on this basis (e.g. Humphrey, Onon 1996; Pedersen 2011; Manduhai 2013; Bumochir 2002; Swancutt 2012; Empson 2011; Shimamura 2017).

science and analytical categories based on the dualism of nature and culture, body and spirit, etc. However, it is important to emphasize that Mongolian shamans, despite their efforts to present their own versions of shamanism, exist outside of these anthropological discussions; they do not engage with the analytical categories used in anthropology or philosophy. Instead, they have their own reliable sources of knowledge and seek to represent the phenomenon on their own terms – an approach that this article aims to explore. It revolves around the questions about the selected Mongolian shamans' construction of knowledge about shamanism in the 21st century, the sources of their definitions (or lack of definitions) of basic concepts, the manners in which they talk about non-human beings, and how they establish cooperation with "clients."

The article is based on materials made available on the Internet by the shamans themselves. It discusses the activity of three Mongolian shamans, one of whom – Urantsetsegiin Khosbayar – invites and introduces other shamans in his podcasts as part of his promotion of Mongolian shamanism, so that the presented material in general is based on accounts of over a dozen shamans. I have watched about thirty podcasts (1–1.5 hours each) and many other programs, videos and live streams shared by shamans on the Internet. The database I worked on contains links to at least 115 (75+20+20) videos and podcasts. The criteria for selecting the three main shamans were their social popularity and activity focused on education and promoting shamanism in the media. I take their online activity as an opportunity of expanding the ethnographic research to new ways of representation existing on a digital platform (Underberg, Zorn 2013). The space created by the shamans themselves can be treated as an example of a "field" in the sense of George Marcus's multi-sited ethnography (Burrell 2009). This approach makes it possible to assume the perspective of an average recipient and minimize the role of the researcher to the point of pure observation.[2] The cut-off date for the period of my observations was June 2024. I watched the videos and podcasts of the selected shamans that were available until that time, guided primarily by the individual topics and threads I followed. These were the shamans' narratives addressing the laymen, i.e. presentations of a specific field of knowledge in a language accessible to ordinary people, but above all – to the participants of the same culture, i.e. Mongolian speakers, who share certain categories of thinking about the world, including ideas about non-human beings, regardless of whether they believe in their agency. I propose that this is a multidimensional discourse, in which shamans at the same time address the ordinary recipients – "Mongolian clients," i.e. practitioners of shamanistic rituals, as they pose a form of challenge, and a question directed towards such sciences as anthropology, cognitive science or psychology.

[2] Realistically speaking, it is generally impossible to gain insight into the activities of such a large group of shamans in such a short time within the classic field research. Even when good rapport exists with a shaman, there may not be enough opportunities to receive so much information. In addition, the ability to replay their materials, and to analyse their production in time, even over several years, as well as the possibility of replaying their statements are highly valuable. Such material also provides the possibility of observing multiple factors, much more than a one-time interview during a participatory observation in the field.

My main interest in the activities of these shamans was not so much promotion of shamanism for the purpose of acquiring clients, or displaying their journalistic talents, but rather as sites of knowledge-making within an area where the discourse had been taking place primarily in Buddhist, Tibetan-Chinese terms, or in the 20th-century terms of the Soviet science. Therefore, the aim of this article is not so much to present an analysis of the shamans' activities but to focus on the content that shamans themselves wish to present, using various forms of creativity. It is constructed through a careful observation of shamans as subjects of their own research, in an attempt to understand their categories of thinking, and choose analytical tools adjusted to their vision of the world. Indeed, this would mean the overcoming of cultural relativism.

## Shamanic activities

> Shaman Khosbayar (34 years old)
> *Mongolian shamanism is a tradition and heritage, and new media is a powerful force that will help preserve it.*

Khosbayar has become recognizable to Mongolian audience after taking part in 2014 edition of a popular talent show that featured competing shamans. He is admittedly among the top "media" shamans in Mongolia, and his activity has been documented on the Internet over the last ten years. He presents himself as the founder of the Tenger Tailal association, which currently counts about fifty members and has been particularly active for the last five years. The group has produced a total of 35 programs, 88 videos and two documentaries, most of which are available on its YouTube channel (e.g. Tenger Tailal Shaman 2021a).

One of the most important aspects of Khosbayar's activity is the production of his own program *Tailal* (Explanation), which aims to present the essence of Mongolian shamanism (*mongolyn böö mörgöl*) to the audience. So far, thirteen episodes of this program have been made (40–90 minutes each). Some episodes are broadcasted directly from the homes of people who asked the shaman for help by agreeing to participate in the program. In front of the camera, they tell their stories, most often asking to indicate the cause of diseases, accidents, deaths of people in unexplained circumstances, or serial deaths in one family. Khosbayar, alternating with two other shamans from the association, also interviews them in front of the camera, diagnoses the problem using divination objects (so-called *khel khuur*, sheep bones, "rosaries," pebbles), and identifies the cause of the problem. The most commonly recognized are *lusyn*[3] *khorlol* – angering the spirit-owners of a given town, for example by settling in an inappropriate place. The program shows fragments of footage of the rituals of repairing, and ends with statements

[3] *Lus* or *lus savdag* – non-human beings, so-called spirit-owners, that reside in mountains, rivers, valleys, etc. These are borrowings from the Tibetan language preserved in Mongolian. The Mongolian phrase *uul usny ezed*, which has the same meaning, is also popular.

from the participants of the program, their thanks for free help and their words of conviction in the improvement of the situation.

Other episodes are devoted to the questions of what shamanism is and what it is not. The guests are people who have been harmed by trusting false shamans (*khuuramch böö*). The program also features a psychologist, lawyer or policeman who provide information on legal regulations regarding crimes or offenses related to abusive activities of the shamans. This kind of episode was also visited by a professor, a philosopher and a Buddhist monk – all of them presented their opinions on selected concepts and terms, such as *süns* (soul), etc. Several other episodes of the *Tailal* show are short films about the relationship between man and nature, about the meaning of karma, and about the meeting with a master-shaman.

The episodes in which other shamans take part are extremely interesting. Khosbayar, as the host of the program, on the one hand, plays the role of a journalist, asks questions that may be interesting to a layman, and on the other hand, being a shaman himself, he is able to raise issues that go far beyond the scope of journalistic competence. This introduces an unusual atmosphere of stories about the complicated relationships between shamans and non-human beings, and about the difficult stages of becoming a shaman. In each of these interviews a common thread is *shakhaa* (literally, pressing), which is what happened to the guests of the show when they refused to accept the *ongod* (guardian spirit of the ancestors): unfortunate accidents, persistent, undiagnosed diseases, dreams, premonitions, predictions, a sense of loneliness. Finally, a master (*bagsh*) appears and introduces them to the secrets of shamanism, and with the completion of the main ritual of accepting *ongod*, the difficulties disappear. According to Khosbayar, all these problems: illness, the feeling of helplessness and lack of help from others, are bestowed so that a person can show compassion and develop an understanding of those who will address him or her as a shaman in the future. Helping others is the mission for which these people were chosen.

A subject that often comes up in the stories of Khosbayar's guests is punishments. One of them says:

> You can take a lot of money at once, for example, to make it easier for a politician to fight competitors. As when they offered me a three-room apartment, for example. However, an apartment like this will not bring happiness. If not myself, then my children will be hurt one day. There are those who undertake such tasks without fear of punishment, but punishment is there and it is inevitable, because it comes from harming an innocent person. That is why many good shamans die young, because one such mistake is enough (conversation with shaman Ts. Ganzorig, Tenger Tailal Shaman 2021b).

Speaking about the inevitability of punishment, Khosbayar also emphasizes an important point: "A shaman should not be angry with others, get offended and hold the evil inside. In this case, their *ongod*, who always protects their shaman, can sometimes hurt the one with whom the shaman got angry." Therefore,

the *ongod* can inflict punishment against the will of the very shaman it protects. This is an important moment in considering the ontological status of non-human beings with whom the shaman enters into relationships. I will return to this topic later in the paper.

Another important source for following Khosbayar's activities is his Facebook profile under the name Zairan Khosbayar, where he regularly posts updates about his activities. He publishes photos and videos of cyclically organised rituals of worship for the spirit-owners of the most important mountains, of annual actions of cleaning the rivers or other places of "cult," as well as tree planting campaigns. In his statements, local shamanistic postulates on being in harmony with non-human beings are combined with the ideas of global ecology.

Live streams also allow following Khosbayar's trips abroad, e.g. to the Mongolian diaspora in South Korea or Japan, from where he also shares recordings of meetings with Mongols. On the occasion of visiting and performing rituals, Khosbayar often directs comments to the viewers about the rules of preserving their tradition abroad, or advises caution towards local, foreign spirits.

Khosbayar's indisputable achievement was organizing the World Shaman Festival in 2023. It was, as he said, the first attempt to unite different shamanistic circles of Mongolia, to present them under the idea of shamanism as a heritage and tradition. The successful organization of this event became the basis for organizing a similar festival in 2024, in cooperation with the Department of Tourism of the City of Ulaanbaatar and other state and private institutions.

While researching for this article, I closely followed Khosbayar's activity on Facebook, observing the methods he used to encourage different institutions and individuals to participate and co-finance this project. He used a fairly standard form of organizing any social campaigns. To encourage participation in the festival, the key argument in his message was that it would promote Mongolian shamanism on a global scale, and emphasize its importance in the nomadic tradition (*nüüdliin öv soyol*). The official lead theme of the festival was the honouring of Mother Earth, which was quite absent from Khosbayar's other content. Neither did the theme appear in the promotion of the event when the messages addressed the Mongols. Rather, in these communications, the recurring thought was that Mongolia is the cradle of shamanism, and that the world should know about it. Shamans are defined by Khosbayar as the chosen ones, sealed (*tamgalagdsan*) by the will of Heaven (*Tenger*), just like the Mongols themselves, as the "chosen people." He reiterates that being a shaman is tantamount to the ability of establishing contact with the *ongod*, and that it is a hereditary predisposition (*udamshdag*). The basic tenet of shamanic practice is following the principles of expressing respect for the will of the ancestors (*ongod*), spirit-owners of mountains and rivers, protection of the animal and plant world, and respect for the elderly and parents.

One of the ways of promoting the festival was to involve some well-known shamans. Khosbayar first published a public poll asking which shamans the "viewers" – followers of his Facebook page – would like to meet in the "live" show. He then proceeded to visit the requested shamans in their homes or offices, from

where he broadcasted live, giving the floor to the shamans. Khosbayar's interviewees would recount their biographies, while also responding to questions (asked by both Khosbayar and the viewers in the chat room). At the end, the shamans would declare their support for the initiative of organizing the festival and urge the Mongols to support Mongolian shamanism as a form of national heritage.

These "live" shows are not short, and take about 40 minutes. Although some of the shamans explicitly say that they dislike appearing in front of a camera and are generally less talkative, their statements offer a lot of valuable information on oral history. Particularly interesting are stories from the communist era, when shamanism was forbidden, and very few written sources on this subject can be found. Among the interviewees was the daughter of the famous shaman Damdin, named Batchuluun, of about 60 years old (Zairan Khosbayar 2024a), who spoke a lot about her father, about humility towards the state and respect for knowledge, but also about other religions and the importance of living in harmony with the whole environment. Of entirely different tone was the presentation of another famous shaman, N. Khishigjargal, of about 50 years old (Zairan Khosbayar 2024b), whose speech resounded with charisma and pride (bordering on hubris) over being a shaman. Her story was full of business successes, recounting how she travels all over the world to represent Mongolian shamanism (e.g. to a human research clinic in Switzerland) and conducts therapies that bring good results. Khishigjargal is also active on the Internet, giving interviews to the media. They tell the story of her life, filled with tragedy before becoming a shaman: extreme poverty, the death of two sons, cancer disease. Khishigjargal also tells her own life stories and stories of the people she helped as a shaman in her e-books titled *Surgamjit tüükhüüd* (Instructive Stories, see: M-book).

One of the most interesting interviewees was the daughter of the famous Zagdaa shaman named Z. Oktyabr' (Zairan Khosbayar 2024b). Her presentation was received by the audience with extreme enthusiasm. She is a *tüshee*, i.e. the shaman's assistant when he goes into a trance. She was invited because many of Khosbayar's followers asked for a meeting with a *tüshee*, arguing that the role of such a person is crucial in shamanism. They explain that during the so-called descent of the *ongod*, only a few percent of the shaman's own mind is present, depending on individual skills, while the rest is controlled by the *ongod*. During the moment of shaman's absence, *tüshee* takes up the role of the host. The person welcomes the *ongod*, introduces those present at the session, and proceeds to act as an interpreter, translating the participants' questions into the language of the *ongod*, since they do not always understand modern terminology or the clients' issues. *Tüshee* then also passes on the information and recommendation from the *ongod* to the clients. *Tüshee* is therefore an intermediary on whose skills depends whether a particular *ongod* stays longer and whether they are friendly to the gathered. And it is also up to them whether the client who came to the shaman for help will eventually receive it. Oktyabr' has been serving in this role for 33 years, ever since her mother became a shaman. She related her stories of successful and less successful meetings with different *ongod* in a remarkable way. She explained that being a *tüshee*

requires a number of facilitating skills. "It's like a diplomatic protocol – Oktyabr' said – everything has to be done in the right order and in the right manner." The role also requires a lot of sensitivity and sensibility (*medremj*). "You have to be a good psychologist and strategist to make an *ongod* willing to cooperate," says Oktyabr'. In her opinion, some of them are not the wisest, or may have difficulty expressing their mind, or be capricious, so one needs to be able to find the right way to approach them. "Often the *ongod* speak in a ordering and admonishing tone, shouting at customers using a variety of expressions to condemn their behaviour. If I were passing the messages directly in their original form, people wouldn't want to come to the shamans, so I always have to soften their words," says the *tüshee*. In the way she talked about her encounters with *ongod*, there was no shadow of a doubt that she was talking about real beings. There is no room for thinking in terms of an altered state of consciousness.

There were other, equally interesting stories of shamans recounted in Khosbayar's live streams, but what is noteworthy here is that the organization of the festival brought about a rare opportunity of introducing the biographies of some of the famous Mongolian shamans, as told by themselves, to the wider public. They were able to reach a large audience, ranging between several hundred to several thousand viewers on Facebook. Khosbayar himself pays very close attention to the number of viewers and never fails to encourage further dissemination of his stories on Facebook. He appears to be a person of his generation, who has got to know the "magic" of social media in his pursuit of reaching the broadest possible audience.

The World Shaman Festival was held with support from several institutions, including the Chinggis Khan National Museum or the Mongolian Tourism Association. The agenda of the three-day event included a variety of activities: Mongolian traditional "three manly games" – wrestling, horse racing, archery – as well as concerts and conferences with the participation of shamans. At the opening ceremony, Prof. Shahbaz Khan, representative of UNESCO from the Beijing branch, called in to congratulate via a video link. Overall, some 700 shamans took part in the festival (including over 200 shamans from 31 countries, and shamans from across 30 shamanic associations in Mongolia).

Khosbayar himself reported the events live on his Facebook profile. One of the most interesting moments was his relation from a joint "ecumenical" shamanising ceremony taking place by a large fire. Viewers could watch how his shaman guests from Russia, Mexico, Japan, Tuva, Nepal, Taiwan, Korea, Sweden, Canada, and other countries practice shamanising, through the eyes of a Mongolian shaman. Knowing neither the languages nor the rituals of the shamans he hosted, Khosbayar appeared to assume a role of a passive observer, and had virtually nothing to say. I am afraid that even Mircea Eliade himself, had he been present, would have had trouble finding a single thread uniting these shamans.

A couple of days later, Khosbayar and another shaman, Kharcaga, streamed a post-festival summary. They thanked all of the sponsors and everyone who contributed to the organization of the event and reflected on some of the difficulties they encountered. They admitted that organisation of an event at such a large, national

scale, involving participation of so many foreign guests, exceeded the financial capabilities of the association. However, they also agreed that the festival was a success in that it managed to promote Mongolian shamanism. "After 30 years of shamanism's rebirth, the Mongolian people are finally aware of what it is. Now it is time for the world at large to know Mongolian shamanism," Khosbayar said. Both were happy about the offer of cooperation made by the UNESCO representatives and were looking forward to the opportunity of promoting shamanism on a global scale.

Shaman Angar (about 40 years old)
*It is necessary to distinguish shamanism from superstitions.*

Angar drew my attention through his notable eloquence and a pronounced, compelling need to speak about shamanism and to elucidate its complex content. His mode of articulating shamanism differed somewhat from that of Khosbayar, as it was characterized by a more "traditional" approach. Podcasts featuring him began appearing online only recently (since March 2024), yet he quickly garnered a substantial following drawn to his insightful interpretations of shamanism. What set his manner of speaking apart was his frequent use of scientific terminology. Additionally, there were no explicit nationalistic or chauvinistic accents that characterize many other Mongol shamans' statements in the context of the Mongols being "chosen by Heaven."

Angar has founded the International Museum of Shamanism in Ulaanbaatar. As he says, the museum collection was created from exhibits left after two temporary exhibitions that he organized in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science and with the National Museum of Mongolia. While working on the exhibition, Angar argued that people need reliable knowledge about shamanism, since there is a lot of confusion and misunderstandings around this phenomenon. That was why he decided to demonstrate and educate what shamanism is through museum activities. Together with his apprentice, they constructed the museum building in one of the yurt districts in Ulaanbaatar. According to the shaman, there are currently over 1,000 artefacts collected from all of the Mongolian provinces (*aimags*) in the museum. He believes that these objects are an inseparable part of Mongolian tradition and culture, so they must be valued and protected. Additionally, he points out that they have more than just a material dimension, and can harm people when handled improperly.

His podcast entitled *Yertönc* (Universe, see: IMS 2024a, 2024b; Star TV Mongolia 2024) is a conversation between a host B. Erdenee and Angar, and although on several occasions Angar denied being an academic, he is one of the very few shamans that I know of to speak about shamanism through definitions of specific shamanistic concepts and phenomena like *ongod*, *süns*, or *albin tiiren* (a type of inimical spirit), and comparing them to concepts present in other religions. His discourse is evidently influenced by Mongolian-language shamanistic literature, to which he himself refers.

When answering what a *süns* is and whether there is an afterlife, he begins by noting that science has proven the soul to weight "about 3% of a gram," and that after death, people go to the world they had themselves imagined during their lives. In turn, he maintains, the Mongolian worldview before the Buddhist ideas became widespread did not include either a concept of hell or paradise, or of reincarnation in the body of other beings, including animals. According to the shaman, there was only the karma (*üüliin ür*) principle according to which a person after death was reborn as a human, but depending on whether their actions in the previous life were right or wrong, they would be reborn with either a good fate (*sain zaya*) or a bad one (*muu zaya*). In his opinion, the essence of Mongolian shamanism is the belief in the spirits of ancestors, shamans or spirit-owners of mountains, rivers or valleys, who assist or punish people according to their deeds. These non-human beings are highly diversified and strictly hierarchal. Select people, i.e. shamans, may have short-term contact with *ongod* from which they draw knowledge about the past, present and future. The condition for this "encounter" is the performance of strictly defined *yos jayag* rituals concerned with shamanic costumes, drum ornaments, and hymn texts passed down from generation to generation through local traditions. These practices enable a shaman to temporarily receive *ongod* within their body. Therefore, according to Angar, *ongod* are actually only information that temporarily appears in the shaman's consciousness as a form of intellect (*oyun ukhaan*), and only when the appropriate conditions are met. This form of intellect should not have any personal characteristics, Angar emphasizes.

Another argument he makes is that the contemporary Mongols fail to distinguish the essence of shamanism from superstitions (*mukhar süseg*). When a person gets ill, he explains, they need to see a doctor, get tested and start treatment, because modern medicine has great achievements grounded in science. However, if modern medicine does not bring an effective solution, or is unable to diagnose a disease, it could be caused by the anger of the *lus savdag*, or it could be a sign that the patient has been chosen by the *ongod* and is an intermediary between the ancestors and their living descendants. The help of a shaman is then needed to discern which of these reasons contributes to the person's illness. Similarly, there is no point in asking a shaman to assist in finding a job, because it is out of their competence. The most a shaman can do in this respect is to advise on whether a given job is suitable for the person, i.e., if it is in accordance with their fate (*zaya*) and therefore likely to bring prosperity – since there can be unsuitable jobs which despite the person's efforts would not lead to success. As Angar explains, a shaman can help, for example, when a person is suffering as a result of their ancestors' fault. This situation may be fixed through a supplication ritual. He opposes the attitudes of those shamans who "taint" the image of shamans by dealing with small matters, such as resolving marital quarrels, performing enrichment rituals, or "fixing" exam results. Such issues, he argues, are beyond the competence of shamans, even if some shamans believe that they can affect them. Most of all, in his opinion, such matters are not of the highest importance. A shaman should focus on showing the person what is right for them, so that they live in harmony with themselves.

A good shaman – according to Angar – will connect the person with themself. He points out the similarity of this logic with psychology, and actually encourages listeners to visit psychologists. As a discipline that has not so far been popular in Mongolia, psychology should, according to Angar, start being developed.

Angar's interest in Buddhism, cognitive science, and "Western" science in general – as compared with his shamanistic vision – led him to various interesting conclusions. An old custom of retaining the last breath of the dying person in a piece of felt or animal fur is connected by Angar to the special property of hair, which, he observes, has the ability to store information. He compares this practice to the process of reading DNA information from hair in scientific laboratories. He also concludes that the sutras of Tibetan Buddhism, which has been widespread among the Mongols, were much better at describing and depicting the various classes of non-human beings and the souls of those who were stuck on earth after death. Therefore, Angar carries out an interesting comparative work, juxtaposing different interpretations of the same phenomena. As I mentioned previously, shaman Batchuluun also spoke about the importance of gathering knowledge from various sources.

Morality (*yos züi*), as certain rules of behaviour, the violation of which leads to punishment, also draws a lot of Angar's attention. He says: "People think that shamans can do everything. Why don't you kill these greedy, immoral politicians, they ask? But a shaman is not for killing people. Had they killed anyone, severe punishment would follow, because everything has its consequences" (IMS 2024c).

> Shaman Tüdev / Tenger (about 50 years old)
> *Good shaman is the one who learned how to cooperate with the ongod. This requires both knowledge and skills.*

I personally met shaman Tüdev in 2012 during my fieldwork in Dornod, a city in eastern Mongolia. I was intrigued by a long line of people queuing in front of one of the apartment blocks. I learned that they were waiting for a consultation with the famous shaman Tüdev, winner of a shaman TV show, who came with a visit from the capital for a few days. I then decided to see what such a visit looks like, so I took a place in a long queue to get my number at six in the morning. I returned the next day, and after many hours of waiting, I got to see the shaman for around 15 minutes. She had nothing special to tell me, apart from recommending a ritual for my sick mother, and asserting that we will meet again. I had forgotten about the visit, but now, 12 years later, while looking at the shamans' media profiles for the purposes of the article, I typed her name into a search engine and found Tüdev hosting a podcast for Mongols from South Korea and presenting herself as male. The shaman now has thick facial hair and a different, deeper voice, but the distinctive smile known to the viewers of the shaman TV show, the one I saw live, stayed the same.

An extensive interview from ten years ago can be found on the Internet, in which the shaman introduced her official name as Ganbold Bolorchimeg, while Tüdev, as she claimed, was the name given to her by the *ongod*. According

to the interview, she graduated in religious studies at the Buddhism College at one of the universities in South Korea, as well as in journalism studies in Ulaanbaatar. For a long time, there was no information about her, except for a laconic note about her gender transition and hormone therapy. Since 2022, the shaman has been appearing online under the male name Tenger, and hosting a video show *Tengertei yarilcya* (Let's Talk to Heaven, see: Tenger Shaman TV 2023). As he says, the purpose of this podcast is to help beginner shamans and shamans who, harassed by invisible beings and unreal shamans, are left to their own devices.

His YouTube channel features about 20 episodes of the show (in 2022–2023) and one has to admit that they are very interesting. As the show host, shaman Tenger invites to each episode one of the many people who want to meet him and ask for advice on how to solve their shamanic problems. He sends a text message to the selected person in advance, providing a short information about the expected date and time of contact. Each episode is dedicated to one person alone and lasts from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours depending on the needs. The chosen person talks live about their shamanistic experiences and asks questions. Most often these are requests for an opinion on whether they are on the "right" path, whether their *ongod* is authentic. Tenger does excellently as host, and the show is incredibly engaging. Despite the show being in essence merely a long dialogue between two people, in which the camera is pointed continuously only at the host, while the guest can only be heard, like the voice of a listener on the radio, it is very engaging. After listening to the story, and occasionally pausing to get additional information, Tenger presents his interpretation of the situation, which is often diametrically opposed to what the person themself presented. The stories are very different, but they all revolve around the themes of vocations, shamanic diseases, intuitions, dreams, difficult relationships between master and disciple. But above all, the stories are about the agency of *ongod* intertwined within "real" events of everyday life. The shaman interprets those events from the point of view of a master equipped with the necessary knowledge thanks to his effective communication with his powerful *ongod*. He emphasizes that the key is not an extensive knowledge as such, but also the experience of dealing with the *ongod*. Knowing only the name, surname and date of birth of a guest of the show, he claims to establish contact with them in a broader dimension: being able to see the person themself, with their character traits etc., but most importantly, their guardian spirits. Time and again, Tenger says, a podcast episode came about spontaneously when, in the middle of a busy day, his *ongod* told him to connect with a particular person and help them on the show.

Although we only get to see one person on the screen, the impression is that there are several agents present apart from the host: the guest, the *ongod* of the guest, and Tenger's *ongod* (one or more). The host of the program must, he says, communicate with all of them at the same time, and he sometimes expresses regret that his viewers cannot see the *ongod* standing next to him in front of the camera. The *ongod* are emotional, calm or ambitious, pretty or not, kind or indifferent – in a word, very human-like in their diversity. Analysing various points of information,

Tenger combines seemingly unrelated elements of the story to create a narrative that spells the answer to the guest's question. Occasionally, the same person gets invited after some time has passed to tell the viewers if any changes had taken place, and if the teachings of shaman Tenger proved effective.

Certain common threads permeate Tenger's statements. He teaches to respect the masters, and to avoid criticizing, judging or harming others. Tenger says he despises shamans who charge elevated fees for their services. His own podcasts are full of heartfelt words (about *setgel*[4]), extended expressions of gratitude, and interchanges of mutual kindness. The latter are indeed one of the explicit goals of his shows, he says, because getting a lot of human *setgel* assures him that he has been successful in helping others. Working on a specific example and showing how a given situation should be understood, Tenger demonstrates what, according to him, constitutes proper, moral shamanic behaviour.

## Overview of shamanic narrative themes

### Knowledge

What unites the shamans' statements is their objection to the recent drastic decline in public trust in shamans in Mongolia, and the desire to improve the situation. In their opinion, among the big problems are allegations that the fees for shamanic services are inflated, especially in the case of adepts, and the activity of so-called false shamans who cause people great material losses as well as mental and physical harm.

The contributing factor, according to the shamans I presented, is ignorance. As they argue, in the absence of canonical texts and institutions responsible for generational transmission, Mongolian shamans who became active after the 1990s did not know how to deal with the shamanic powers freed after four centuries of prohibition on practicing shamanism. Therefore, they needed to learn for themselves, through trial and error, and only gradually discover what the phenomenon is. Khosbayar, Angar and Tenger explain that it is not easy to distinguish the true *ongod* – the spirit of ancestors – from spirits of lower rank, i.e. those that for some reason got stuck on earth after death and did not go where the souls of the dead should go (*tiiren*, *ad*, *zetger*). They can be of various kinds, and they are harmful, "inhabiting" a specific territory and interacting with other beings. The stronger ones can also nest in the human body. It is then easy to confuse such a spirit with *ongod*, so a person may undergo the ritual of receiving an *ongod* and cooperate with the being, assuming that they have become a shaman. Yet, such spirits have no power, they are immoral and can demand harmful acts from the shaman, exposing the person to misfortune. True *ongod* do no harm to either the shaman or others. They can only punish for improper acts.

[4] *Setgel* – one of crucial terms for understanding the concept of human and non-human beings, encompassing notions such as mind, emotion and heart.

Angar adds another cause of the appearance of false shamans. He says that every human being is endowed with certain abilities (premonitions, intuition, ability to communicate with spirits, etc.) that are dormant under ordinary conditions, i.e. when a person's mind is calm. The difficulties of life activate this potential, and a person begins to experience dreams, premonitions, etc. This is a deceptive resemblance to a shaman's calling. Hence, there have appeared many shamans in Mongolia that do not actually have the vocation. The error is mostly on the part of other shamans, masters who are incapable of recognizing an actual *ongod*. This is the reason why all three of the shamans mentioned here felt compelled to share their experiences and educate others on how to recognize a true shaman, substantiated by the support of true *ongod*, and a sturdy principle of justice (*zöv yavakh yos*). The legitimate source of knowledge is the relationship with the true *ongod*, interpreted in a correct way by the shaman.

## Punishment/karma

Although not all shamans use the term karma (*üüliin ür*), which is associated primarily with Buddhism and Hinduism, the concept, understood as a certain category of inevitability and a principle of justice, appears in the narrations of all the shamans I have discussed.

Although Khosbayar, Angar and Tenger all claim to have a strong *ongod* with whom they know how to cooperate, they emphasize that this does not make them omnipotent and omniscient. But this was not always so obvious to them. Almost all shamans spoke of typical feelings of bursting with pride and self-confidence at the initial stage of their practice, when they thought they were omnipotent. Over time, they understood that there are certain rules that must be followed and principles that must not be transgressed. Ignorance in this matter can cost them their lives. The concept of karma is primarily related to that of *khorlol*, or harm, resulting from someone's offense – it can be inflicted as much on a single person, as on a group, such as all of their offspring, or lineage. The *khorlol* can originate from either *ongod* or other non-human beings. If a person polluted a river or broke a tree branch, they may have angered the spirit guardian of the river or tree. This necessitates the performance of a ritual of correction (*udmyn zasal*), which often engages the entire lineage. Therefore, the basic role of shamans is to recognise the harm, determine its cause and ways of mending, and bring harmony in the relationships between human and non-human beings.

## Heritage (*öv soyol*) and tradition (*ulamjlal*)

Another important element of the shamans' statements is the belief that shamanism is part of the nomadic tradition and heritage both unique and at risk of extinction, and as such it should be nurtured. A shaman provides knowledge about this

tradition and with its help he shapes correct relations with the surrounding world of human and non-human beings. In this case, tradition should not be understood in opposition to modernity, but rather as the permanent element of the identity of a given community, existing within a changing environment. In addition to the knowledge of proper rituals and correct behaviours, there also persist "biological" – as Angar phrased it – predispositions to heightened sensitivity to non-human beings within lineages.

For Angar, the museum serves as a form of reference point for his narrative about shamanism. Erdene, the host of their podcast, emphasized how when he visited, some rooms felt bright and positive, while others triggered fear, and he advised not to go there alone. The knowledge contained there is therefore perceptible, experiential.

As former participants in TV shows, Khosbayar and Tenger (also being journalist by training) have mastered the techniques of presenting certain content to the audience, and they possess an excellent sense of the viewer's expectations. However, the use of latest forms of modern technology serves to promote very traditional ideas, such as respect for the elders, the ancestral spirits, the spirit-owners of mountains or rivers, the importance of performing worship rituals for the fire or the sun, or rituals related to the nomadic rhythm of life. They believe that these rituals still have an impact on the fate of humans.

## Non-human beings

Angar is the first shaman I have ever heard saying that the *ongod* are impersonal, that they are an "objective" form of information. But he did not elaborate on ontological topics again. He does eagerly evoke elements of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as references to Christian concepts, modern psychology and neurology, but these serve him only to talk about the correct way of life (*zöv yavakh*) and the inevitability of punishment for wrong deeds. Angar does not provide a definition of the category of appropriate life, and even avoids answering such a question, but he does promote a life in moderation, causing no harm to others, and striving for harmony both internally and in relations with the surrounding world.

Tenger and Khosbayar's podcasts and shows better demonstrate the nature of the *ongod* through practice. What the shamans clearly state though is the anthropomorphic nature and ontological hierarchy of the *ongod*: one from a lower hierarchy will have a different kind of relationship with a shaman than one in a higher position, who will also be more morally oriented. Their programs are, in essence, presentations of how to manage the relations with individual invisible beings who are, for them, both authentic and real. Authenticity, however, must be understood relationally, since there are no *ongod* without a shaman, as there is no real shaman without an *ongod*. Therefore, both shows define little, but above all they make us experience and feel the entire complexity of interdependence of human and non-human beings within the hierarchical cosmic system.

## Do shamans research shamanism?

Shamanism is one of the most blurred categories in cultural anthropology, and the criticism of this concept most often comes from anthropologists themselves. They continue to make methodological revisions and problematize the epistemological foundations of anthropology as a field of science (e.g. Taussig 1987; Hutton 2001; Humphrey, Thomas 1994). One of the important aspects of this criticism is related to the claim that the term arose as an analytical category in the conventions of Western social sciences, responding to its historical conditions. Andrei Znamenski, for example, attributes the popularity of shamanism, and the emergence of neo-shamanistic movements, to the growing antimodern sentiments in the West, while pointing out that its understandings draw from the writings of such 20th-century intellectuals as Mircea Eliade, who contributed to the creation of a vision of shamanism as static, perennial, and archaic. And yet, as Clifford Geertz stressed, "shamanism, like any other ethnological abstractions invented by Westerners, hardly withstood scrutiny when applied to particular nature religions in non-Western societies" (Znamenski 2007: 227).

On the other hand, Karenina Kollmar-Paulenz notes that the notion of "shamanism" was not only formed in the imagination of Western anthropologists but had already existed between the 17th and 19th centuries within the imagination of Mongolian Buddhist intellectuals (2012). Based on her study of written sources (biographies, chronicles, dictionaries), she shows that before the spread of Tibetan Buddhism, the sources only contain words for individual shamans: *böö* (Old Mong. *bo'e*) or *udagan* (female shaman). Yet from the 16th century onwards, shamans started to be referred to as followers of a "black faith," or the "wrong view" – as opposed to the "true view," i.e. Tibetan Buddhism. In her opinion, this was the strategy of Tibetan missionaries whose goal was to combat the local beliefs. Over time, however, the language of description changed, the term "teaching of the shamans" began to be used, without the judgment implicit in the "wrong view." Nevertheless, as Kollmar-Paulenz points out, even in the later 19th century, there was a pejorative term applied to shamans. This approach was well known to Russian and German ethnographers who travelled among the Mongols in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. "They have been well aware of the Buddhist attitude towards the shamans and their treatment as a homogenous religious group and teaching opposed to Buddhism," writes Kollmar-Paulenz (2012: 102).

Mongolian social anthropologist Dumalyn Bumochir offers an even more detailed analysis of how the concept of Mongolian shamanism as a homogeneous religious system was created. He writes that the term *böö*, referring to individual spiritual practitioners already present in medieval sources, in the 19th century became a component of the word *böö mörgöl* (shamanism) to denote the academic, "Western" concept of shamanism. The latest combination, *böögiin shashin* (shamanic religion), has an even shorter history, since it dates back to the 1980s, when it was associated with the idea of institutionalization of national religion in opposition to world religions (Bumochir 2014). He says:

> Much of "shamanism" and "shamanic religion" over the past 200 years has been constructed and institutionalized by many different agencies, namely Buddhism, Christianity, lay people, shamans and scholars. From the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century, scholars conducted research mostly on written materials and produced works suffused by generalization, simplification, ethnocentrism and nationalism, by making individual spiritual practitioners "something" not necessarily matching those individuals' practices and knowledge. During the greater part of the twentieth century, due to political restrictions and also because shamans have oral traditions, many scholars, mostly Mongolians, had to produce research on "shamanism" and "shamanic religion" without little or any involvement of shamans (Bumochir 2014: 487).

Thus, when Mongolian shamans speak of the scientific categories of shamanism, they refer primarily to Mongolian-language literature, in which, for example, the history of shamanism in the Marxist ideology era was written in an evolutionary spirit, tracing the genesis of Mongolian shamanism to the times of matriarchy, etc. (Dalai 1959; Pürev 1998). However, for the most part, shamans rely on their own sources of historical knowledge in the sense that the *ongod* with whom they communicate present to them their own narrative of the times – often very distant – when they lived as human beings. At this point, the question arises for anthropologists: How should these shaman narratives be described in the language of anthropological theory? As Agnieszka Halemba writes, it is precisely at such disconnect between analytical terms and local categories that methodological trends such as the ontological turn have emerged – in response to disillusionment with cultural relativism (2022: 12). It is impossible to list all the works created within the post-humanist trend over the last few decades, but they all problematize the foundations of the modernist anthropocentric social sciences and revise concepts such as animism (e.g. Descola 1992; Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2010). One of the common themes is perspectivism, which has been derived from poststructuralist philosophy and was applied in the anthropology of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro as "Amerindian perspectivism" (1998). Viveros de Castro proposed a new language for describing the cosmology of indigenous Amazonians, which he characterized as based on "spiritual unity and corporal diversity," as opposed to the "'cultural construction' of the West built on the ontological premise of the unity of nature and plurality of cultures" (1998: 470).

In a special issue of the *Inner Asia* journal from 2007, Danish anthropologist Morten Pedersen and other scholars of Mongolian studies looked at Mongolian animistic cosmology by comparing it to Amerindian perspectivism. The editors of the volume – Morten Pedersen, Caroline Humphrey, and Rebecca Empson – show that it is impossible to apply a uniform, static concept of perspectivism in the context of North Asia (2007: 145–147). Instead, they point to a different kind of perspectivism,

> namely an inter-human perspectivism (humans becoming other humans) as opposed to the extra-human perspectivism (humans becoming nonhumans, and vice versa), found both in Northern North Asia [Siberia] and the Amazon (Pedersen et al. 2007: 144).

The authors of the volume also proposed the idea of vertical perspectivism, called by Martin Holbraad and Rane Willerslev "transcendental perspectivism," according to which "beings can 'become-other' not because they are themselves already 'other,' but rather because the perspectives that they can occupy in a crucial sense remain other to them already" (Holbraad, Willerslev 2007: 331). The narratives I presented seem to correspond to the concept of vertical perspectivism, because the shamans very clearly emphasize the hierarchy of non-human (and human) beings. And Khosbayar's stories about the *ongod* acting independently of the will of the shamans or the assistant, as well as those by *tüshee* Oktyabr', about meetings with the *ongod* who temporarily occupy the shaman's body, are a perfect example of transcendental perspectivism.

In an attempt to find theories that would best describe the reality of the shamans' life, I would like to mention another philosopher, a representative of British idealism from the beginning of the 20th century, Francis Herbert Bradley (1848–1924). The basis of his philosophy was the principle of internal relation, resulting from his adoption of ontological monism. It contributed to the dissemination of the view that "relations and elements, not substances, their attributes and conditions are the basic categories of thinking. (…) In this way, he paved the way for the logic of relations, which replaced the classical subject-predicate logic" (Szymura 1990: 7). As a speculative philosophy, it was loudly refuted by the founders of analytical philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century, at the time of the greatest popularity of logical atomism and neo-positivism. However, it also had its supporters, especially among 20th-century Asian thinkers (Zapaśnik 1973: 122), and it does not fail to interest contemporary philosophers (Uchan 2021: 136). Bradley's principle of internal relations in logic assumed that there are no relations other than internal. Polish philosopher Stanisław Zapaśnik (1936–2006) pointed out three consequences of this thinking for philosophy, and applied them in his research in Central Asia: things and their qualities are determined by relations and do not exist outside these relations; in the relationship between the part and the whole the individual being is a sign of the whole; and the category of substance becomes absent in philosophical thinking (2006: 44–46). It seems that these consequences of thinking along the principle of internal relations well reflect the logic of many of the narrative threads of the shamans I discussed here. They talk about a world in which a person is relationally connected to ancestors, to their place of birth, to the spirit-owners of a given town – acting non-human beings. They talk about intergenerational karmic interdependencies and the soul as aspects of this whole, with individual persons being really only signifiers of the lineage. Identity and agency are produced within relationships and have no existence outside of them (the absence of the category of philosophical substance).

Also noteworthy is a certain concept that can be identified in the statements of the shamans: the dichotomy of *am'tai/am'gui* (animate/inanimate), the basis of which is the concept of *am'*, which refers to life force, vitality (Saincogtu 2000). In Mongolian studies, Vanchigiin Saincogtu, a researcher from Inner Mongolia, proposed the concept of *aminism* as opposed to Tylorian *animism*. *Am'*, as he points out, is relational and fluid, it can have a communal character, be transferred from one element of the relationship to another, move, and have agency. It can be used to explain the ontological basis of *ongod* that possess *am'* even though they do not possess a (biological) body, or only temporarily "borrow" the body of a shaman. *Am'* is also relational in the narratives of the shamans in the sense that not all mountains and rivers or stones have it, but those that do are causative insofar as they enter into relationships.

## Conclusions

The term "research" in the context of the social sciences is associated with a scientific procedure that is rather unsuited to the narratives of shamans. Not only because shamanism is a fuzzy category in anthropology, but also because, in the case of Mongolian shamanism, the creators of this concept were mainly external actors who imposed external criteria for the reification of this phenomenon. In the language of the narratives of the aforementioned shamans, the categories of ontological turn or internal relationships are not only untranslatable because of the language barrier, but above all they cannot be applied as a procedure for acquiring and organizing knowledge. And these are not always needed by shamans, because they seem to place more value in knowledge gained through illumination, similarly to Tibetan Buddhism, which served an educational function over several centuries (Ochir, Enkh-Tüvshin 2004: 276–278). When presenting the concept of shamanism, they therefore rely on their own tools, describing the world in terms of a system that appears open, fluid, relational, relying on assemblages. It is worth looking at these activities as their own ways of learning, acquiring and passing on knowledge, because they talk about them as products of their own agency. In my opinion, this is research carried out through their own procedures of knowledge production; but this does not imply cultural relativism, because I treat it primarily as a search for certain general principles of understanding reality in various discourses. This article focuses solely on certain selectively chosen issues, as it is not feasible to cover all relevant topics within such a limited scope. Therefore, it serves as a proposal to expand the theory of ethnographic research by incorporating criteria that better account for local ontologies.

The shamans, although they adopt diverse visions of shamanism and ways of acting, remain open to external concepts. They refer to the categories of tradition, heritage, Buddhism, support global movements such as neo-shamanism and environmentalism, and eagerly use new media. They do not always put themselves in opposition to science, and often look for a way to overcome the barrier between

scientific and non-scientific description. However, it is not possible to define their concept of shamanism in terms of chaos and arbitrariness; on the contrary, they think along the lines of a certain hierarchical order, based on the principles of cosmic justice, and the inevitability of punishment for improper behaviour. While the criteria of this order may change, we can assume that certain fundamental rules – such as those of logic, as I have proposed – remain stable.

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## SUMMARY

### Shamans study shamanism: The world in the podcasts of Mongolian shamans

The article analyses the social media activity of selected Mongolian shamans intended for dissemination of what they believe to be the correct knowledge about Mongolian shamanism. The Internet is a tool that, combined with their own creativity, allows them to convey aspects of this phenomenon that are difficult to verbalize. On the one hand, the shamans present a great diversity, make use of different ideas (tradition, heritage, Buddhism), and are open to global movements such as neo-shamanism or environmentalism, but on the other hand, their statements exhibit some common, recurring elements about the complex interdependence of human and non-human beings in a hierarchical cosmic system. This analysis is a voice in the discussion on the production of knowledge in various discourses, an attempt to incorporate the ontology of the "subject" into ethnographic theories, inspired by the work of philosophically oriented anthropologists.

**Keywords:** Mongolian shamanism, *böö*, internal relation in logic, ontological turn, transcendental perspectivism, aminism, digital ethnography