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Postsocialist animism: personhood, necro-personas and public past in Inner Asia

In Soviet times, animism was described as a relic of a primitive socio-economic formation. It was the direct consequence of Lewis Morgan's influence on Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin's thought. The only acceptable place for animism in the socialist society was an ethnographic museum. Theory of social evolution assumed a hierarchy between the former and present stadiums of human development. In Siberia and Mongolia, this hierarchy was not only operating in time, but also in space and inter-ethnic relations. Socialist city and state farm were spaces of modernity, from which superstitions were forced out either in space (to the outskirts of civilisation) or in time – i.e. relegated to the past, associated with former social formations. Any animistic phenomenon was treated as opposed to modernity (Vakhtin 2006: 49; Peshkov 2012: 172; Sundström 2012). For most authors, Siberian animism, along with other forms of native ontologies and spiritual practices, was identified with shamanism (Sundström 2012: 355–362; Hamayon 2013: 284).¹

Animism emerged into the public sphere out of the blue, right after disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the socialist state-led modernisation. Along with ethnic renaissance and nation-building process, animism was involved in the transformation of the Soviet world. It was not only about shamans' engagement in ethnic mobilisation, but also about the increasing use of an animist perspective to undermine modern state monopoly for the past, resulting in the formation of native regimes of historicity. This is crucial for ethnic institutions for which a newly defined, pre-socialist past becomes a source

¹ According to our records, the animist practices go far beyond shamanism.

of moral authority for the postsocialist present (Humphrey 1992: 378). However, shamanic practices and animistic perspectives are also used by local communities to overcome the trauma of mass repression or to secure their land rights.

One major theoretical issue that has dominated this particular field of inquiry for many years was the authenticity of the so-called neo-shamanic practices. So far, very little attention has been paid to the practical and pragmatic dimensions of postsocialist animism.² The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between animist ontology, shamanic practices, and bottom-up public past in postsocialist Inner Asia.³ This study's specific purpose is to shed some light on the local conceptions of personhood, nonhuman agency, and their role in structuring native visions of the past. The paper is based on a case study of three unique manifestations of the public past in three regions of Inner Asia: (1) Negotiations between families and the spirits of their ancestors – victims of communist purges (Mongolia), (2) Powerful necropersona that allows local communities to gain political subjectivity and undermine conventional post-Soviet historical narratives (Altai), (3) Return of the undead lama Itigilov that caused Buddhist revival in the region (Buryatia). All these cases can only be properly understood if we take into account the local concepts of personhood.⁴

Selected examples seem to support Morten Pedersen's thesis on the generally totemic and hierarchical nature of southern North Asian societies, where inter-human perspectivism dominates, and people enter relations primarily with their ancestors' spirits (Pedersen 2001: 422–423). It is noteworthy that in the communities where I worked, people constantly interacted with nonhuman agents: animals, land masters spirits (*gazryn ezen*), and river hosts (*lusan*). Elements of extra-human perspectivism were also present. Hunters in the Tunka Valley (South Buryatia) told me that bears were previously humans, and that it was dangerous for a hunter to kill more than 40 bears in his lifetime, because after death such a hunter would reincarnate as a bear. On the other hand, some Tuvans maintain social relations with nonhumans, which in Descola's classification (1996: 88) makes them animists. For example, there is a custom to put a straw in an empty vodka bottle because 'an ant might come, he will also want to drink and should be kindly returned home.' However, the cases discussed in this article focus on relationships with posthuman persons, because they play an essential role in creating local historical narratives. Below I present some evidence that, in contemporary Inner Asia, we deal not only with a combination of animistic and totemic features (Willerslev, Ulturgasheva 2012: 50), but also with constant switching and mixing of these two ontologies and naturalism.

² I use the term postsocialist animism because the groups discussed in the text have undergone intensive Soviet-style modernist socialisation. For them, therefore, animism is one of the few available ways of interaction with the world.

³ In this paper, instead of 'public history', I use of the term 'public past' to distinguish indigenous techniques of ordering and representing the past from Western historiography and the institutional forms of commemoration built upon it.

⁴ This paper is the result of the research project No. 2017/25/B/HS3/00675 called *Kinship and Sedentarization in Inner Asian Urban Areas of Hailar, Ulan-Ude and Ulaanbaatar* funded by the Polish National Science Center.

Personhood and the generic notion of the past

According to the classical approach, concepts of personhood in Inner Asia were described using the term 'soul.' Usually, scholars wrote about three souls inhabiting the human body. Numerous authors have discussed this issue (Okladnikov 1937: 860; Mikhailov 1987: 39–62; Kisel' 2009: 13–14), and various approaches have been put forward to conceptualize it, but the term 'soul' tends to be confusing. The concept has been borrowed from Christian and Platonic vocabularies and does not fit any of the three local designations. Anthropologists often deal with different, multi-dimensional forms of subjectivity that go beyond the European concept of the soul (cf. Pedersen, Willerslev 2012: 467–471). The terminology introduced by Russian researchers has undoubtedly modified the original ideas.

It is also hard to overestimate the influence of Buddhism, Orthodoxy, Soviet atheistic modernism, and, finally, the free-market economy on local forms of being in the world. These new worldviews provided significantly different ontologies that have been syncretically internalised by individuals. Acquired worldviews are expressed in practices. They are no longer abstract knowledge, and certainly not a defined ontology, i.e. a theory of what exists and how it exists. That is why conflicts between initially different visions of the world and personality are rare. For instance, during my fieldwork in Tunka Valley in Buryatia, I heard diverse claims. Some people stated that they had one soul, others that they had three, yet others did not know how many souls they had, or indeed, had no opinion on this subject. Once, when I got lost in the forest, I accidentally came across a Buryat cemetery. My host began the purification ritual immediately after I returned home. He thought I could have brought 'something dangerous'. A devout Buddhist named Volodya, holding a lit sprig of juniper, said something about the evil spirits lurking in the cemetery. I asked him:

According to Buddha's teachings, is it not so that after 49 days of being in the *bardo* state [an intermediate state between death and rebirth], the mind has to be reborn in one of the six spheres of existence, following the tendencies accumulated over previous lives?

Volodya's shook his smoothly shaved head, thought for a while and answered:

- Yes, it is reborn [he says], but it is not always successful. Sometimes something goes wrong; someone dies not his own death and then wanders around, comes to his relatives and tries to draw them and take them with him. We call these ghosts *booholdoj*. There are a lot of them in cemeteries, that is why we do not go there.

- In that case, the mind is not reborn, or is it reborn as a ghost? - I tried to integrate these strange words with my previous canonical Buddhist model of the world.

- Reborn or not, ghosts are dangerous. Some say that a man has many souls, and one of them lives in the graveyard after their death. The lamas have recently

hung up the information that there is no *booholdoj*, and all that is just superstition. And whom shall I believe? Everything is intertwined and mixed up: Buddhism, shamanism, and Orthodox beliefs (...) And yet, it is better not to go to the cemetery. After all, does it really matter what kind of ghost will haunt you?

Initially, I interpreted this ambivalence as a manifestation of religious syncretism, and on the other hand as a result of the post-Soviet crisis of ethnic culture. However, at some point it occurred to me that this is what anthropologists call 'culture' in practice – at least until a descriptive cultural model is taught at school.

Animist models and images of the soul, as Katherine Swancutt and Mireille Mazard noted, are often created as a result of a kind of reflexive feedback loop, whereby abstract anthropological ideas about practice and beliefs are acquired and recirculated by researched natives (Mazard, Swancutt 2016: 1–6). It is only when research participants gain this defamiliarised self-image and begin to use anthropological concepts that their statements and practices become consistent. One may conclude that everything is fluid, relative, and complicated, but we shall not dwell on trivialities. It is, therefore, necessary to introduce a working model of local ideas about personhood.

According to Aryuna Suvorova, Buryat shamanists believe that a human being consists of several invisible entities: (1) *sülde* – vitality, life force, (2) *amin* – soul-breath (3) *hünehēn* – soul-shadow. At the time of death, a person first loses his or her life force *sülde*, then the breath – *amin*, and at the very end, *hünehēn* leaves the body. This third component of subjectivity is sometimes described as body-like and material but subtle, stealthy, and noiseless. After death, *sülde* becomes the guardian spirit of the family or is reborn, *amin* remains with the bones of the deceased, and *hünehēn* slowly expires like a candle or goes to the realm of the dead where it is transformed into the predatory wandering spirit – *booholdoj*. Sometimes *sülde* can leave a person who is still alive. It causes his or her to lose strength, and ultimately leads to death. The southern Buryats claim that after death, *sülde* stays with the corpse, *amin* is reborn, and *hünehēn* becomes a wind spirit (*hij*) and keeps watch over the relatives (Suvorova 2012: 162–163).

A similar concept of three-fold complex personhood has been noted among the Mongols. *Ami* is the energy associated with the breath, and it just evaporates after death. The *süüder* (lit. shadow) has a human form, and after death, wanders for some time on the Earth until it sinks into the ground or burns out. Immortal and material *süins* can leave the body in a dream and travel around the world.⁵ Shamans can talk to the *süins* of the dead people. With the help of *süins*, the shaman can also communicate with higher deities (Tulisow 2007: 31–33).

Caroline Humphrey observed a similar concept of spiritual components (*ami*, *süld*, *sumus*) among the Daurs of the Inner Mongolian Barga region (Humphrey, Onon 1996: 2013). Nikolai Baskakov writes about four components of the soul

⁵ During my fieldwork in the Tunka Valley, I noticed that loss of soul is a common diagnosis in Buryat medicine, offered by both lamas and shamans. The similar situation among Mongolian Darkhats was observed by Morten Pedersen (2011: 1–5).

(*süne*) among Siberian Turks: *tyn* (breath), *qut* (vital force), *djula* (twin), and *sür* (image) – a visible ghost of the *djula* that has temporarily left the body. After death, these components diverge and transform into various visible and invisible, ephemeral, and permanent forms (Baskakov 1973: 108–113).

An ethnographer and religious expert Taras Mikhailov argued that in Buryat shamanism human being has an invisible but material soul – *hünehen* or *sünes*. *Hünehen* has the character traits of the person with whom it is associated. It can leave the body, wander the Earth, visit the spirit world, and then return to the body. Bulagats of Cisbaikalia believe in the existence of three souls inhabiting the human body: (1) the good one that has access to the celestial deities *Tengeri* and cares about the host, (2) the medium one that is sometimes stolen by evil spirits, which brings a person to death, and (3) the evil one that always stays in the body and guards its bones after death. The latter afterwards becomes a *booholdoj* (Mihailov 1987: 39). A similar tripartite division can be found among Tuvans, who refer to the right, middle, and lousy soul using the Mongolian terms: *sain*, *dund*, and *muu süns* (Kisel' 2009: 13).

In another version, recorded among the Buryats in Alar district, the first soul after death faces Erlen-khan – the lord of the underworld, and is judged, the second becomes *booholdoj*, and the third is reborn in a new body (Mihailov 2004: 366–367). The specific concept of personality is closely connected with the collective, ancestral dimension of pre-modern Buryat society. At the same time, this concept has been adapted to Buddhist beliefs, sparking new syncretic doctrines, e.g., on ancestral karma. The traditional kinship system influenced perception of reincarnation. Many Buryats believe that ancestors are reborn in the family, hence the custom of tagging the hands and other parts of the corpse's body. Birthmarks in the same places are then sought in newborns, and are believed to be a sign that the ancestor has been reborn as a specific child (Belyaeva 2009: 242–243).⁶

Rebecca Empson, who carried out her research in northeastern Mongolia, also highlights the kinship dimension of personality. Despite biological explanation for human reproduction being taught in schools, at the level of symbolic communication people still believe that the creation of the child's body is the result of a combination of paternal bone (*jasan töröl*) and maternal blood (*cusan töröl*). The ancestors are believed to be reborn within their clan (Empson 2011: 114–115).

Working with the material collected in Mongolia, Oyungerel Tangad, instead of souls, prefers to talk about numerous 'life forces' that make up a human being: *ami* (vitality), *süns* (spirit, intellectual part of life forces), *süld* (individual and ancestral vitality), *bujan* (grace, merit, wealth), *zaja* (fortune, destiny), *hišig* (prosperity). *Ami* is the life force that determines the personality of beings. The person who lost *ami* – dies. The state and lineage group also have *ami*; it can be strengthened with the sacrificial offering – *tahilga* (bur. *tajlgan*). The spirits of illustrious and powerful ancestors become ongons – the guardians of the family (Tangad 2013: 90–111).

⁶ In 2009, during my stay in Ulan-Ude, I lived with a family in which the son was considered to be a reincarnation of his paternal grandfather, and the daughter a reincarnation of her grandmother. The children had the same names as their grandparents.

In her discussion of Tangad Oyungerel analysis Katarzyna Golik noted that the list should also include the Buddhist concept of *hijmori* (tib. *lungta*) – ‘wind horse’, soul-life energy, as well as luck and fate (Golik 2013: 216). These examples do not exhaust the diversity of personhood concepts. Native terminology contains many other terms that can be translated as ‘soul’, ‘mind’, or ‘spirit’. Yuriin Bayansan uses the term ‘soul’ to refer to the Mongolian concept of *setgel*, which is linked to the related terms *ojun uhan*, *bodol*, and which in other contexts could be translated as ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’ or ‘intellect’ (Bayansan 2005: 1–5).

It thus can be concluded that the concept of human personality in Inner Asia is complex, multilayered; it is a temporary aggregate consisting of the body and several different, less visible basic elements, which after death separate from the body. Thus, death is a process of decomposition into different types of matter and energy that transition to a different place and begin to function independently. One element stays with the corpse, posing a threat to the living. The other is reborn within the clan, and yet another one joins the community of ancestral spirits. Therefore, after death, a person can be worshipped with other ancestors, give us advice, and protect our family. He or she can also become a dangerous spirit guarding the bones of the deceased or be reborn as our son or daughter.

The anthropological model of a comprehensive personality explains the taboo related to visiting burial sites, even though people worship ancestors and believe in reincarnation. People do not worship their ancestors in graveyards but in sites devoted to ancestral worship. *Ongons* – ancestral spirits that take care of the family and provide vital energy, in return require regular attention, remembering and sacrifice. Neglected *ongons* can get angry and start tormenting their descendants. Male patrilineage members make ancestor offerings, but more significant rituals should be carried out by a shaman. He also performs rituals to appease the neglected spirits of their ancestors.

During postsocialist transformation, these practices became popular. The end of aggressive atheisation enabled shamans to return to the public sphere, which provided people with more access channels to their ancestors. At the same time, pauperisation, illness, alcoholism, and other ‘plagues’ accompanying this quite violent transformation were explained as the result of the wrath of ancestral spirits, who were often neglected in the communist period – no sacrifices were made to them, and many of them have been forgotten. Caroline Humphrey noted that shamanic practices stimulate a renewal of genealogical lines, relationships between members of kinship groups dispersed between the city and the province. Rituals of ancestors’ worship are also practices that situate the past in the patrilineal family’s structures. Shamans urge people to reconstruct the names of their ancestors and relatives, as well as to discover their family’s history (Humphrey 2002: 205–211). The genealogical lines and stories about ancestors provide a framework for collective memory and perception of the past. As in other kinship-oriented societies, an agnate who is not called forth in public gradually falls into oblivion and eventually disappears from genealogy (cf. Carsten 1995).

Through genealogical narratives and rituals, the community that creates its boundaries by kinship ties forms a usable past.

French historian François Hartog, inspired by the work of Marshall Sahlins, writes about various regimes of historicity. The term in his understanding denotes how specific cultures perceive, express, use, and deal with the past. Hartog noted that in traditional societies, the past is often depicted through myth. Due to the global hegemony of Western historiography, local regimes of historicity take on a political dimension and create alternative forms of representation of the past that undermine Western dominance (Hartog 2005: 8). Neil Whitehead wrote in a similar vein about 'indigenous historicities', emphasising their particular understanding of time, knowledge, and being that make the past meaningful (Whitehead 2003: xi). In Inner Asia, alternative regimes of historicity are used by post-Soviet ethnic minorities to process their political and cultural emancipation. Sahlins himself wrote about mythopraxis, which he defined as organisation of historical action as the projection of mythical relations (Sahlins 1985: 53). In this paper, I consider mythopraxis as one of the leading genres of native regimes of historicity.

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. Ancestors demand respect and remembering from their descendants, causing illness and misfortune as a punishment. However, they can also communicate their will to the shaman, or may appear in a person's dreams and convey their wishes. They can also enter the shaman's body during the rite and speak with their voice to the gathered relatives. In Soviet times, some ancestors have not been spoken of for years and were forgotten not only due to the internal practices of genealogical selection, but passed into oblivion after having been repressed by the State. They must be remain the proverbial 'dust', because their remains had been previously buried in anonymous mass graves.

Shadows of forgotten ancestors

In May 2006, during a short-term visit to the Buryat villages of Khentei and Dornod provinces, my attention was caught by the meticulousness with which many people studied their genealogy. Many of them were writing details down in individual notebooks and drawing pedigree charts. At the time, I considered it to be another expression of traditionalism of the Buryat diaspora in Mongolia, which, in isolation, has preserved its native culture better than the community's ethnic core in Siberia. When an old Buryat man had been showing me a carefully completed family tree for two hours, I considered it to be primarily a revival of those elements of ethnic culture that did not enter the canon of socialist culture and were stigmatised as 'relics of feudalism' or 'superstition'. Admittedly, my interlocutors, when I asked about repressions, often told me that many Buryats

did not know their ancestors well because, under Choibalsan,⁷ most men were deported or shot and buried in unknown graves. However, I saw genealogy as an innocent form of memory organisation. I did not suspect the vital role it plays in overcoming socialist history and the trauma of political repression. Instead, I focused on the incredible proliferation of shamans in the region, especially in the Bayan Uul and Kharkhiraa in Dornod province. In almost every family, there was a man who had become a shaman. Even the son of the lama who hosted us during our stay was a shaman. In Kharkhiraa, on the famous shaman Tsedendamba's initiative, a whole centre was built with a shamanic and Buddhist temple and a complex wooden structure for the shamans' initiation. Every year, several dozen people participate in initiation rites called *šanar*. The number of shamans in the area is increasing because the spirits choose more and more people to be shamans. People's current problems are interpreted as a result of ignoring this calling, rejecting the shamanic gift (*udha, ug*). The long-term fieldwork by Manduhai Buyandelger revealed that shamanic boom is associated with both political transformation and the repression of the 1930s (Manduhai 2013).

The collapse of communism in Mongolia and chaotic privatisation have led to many rural and pastoral communities' rapid impoverishment. People began to live profoundly precarious lives, uncertain about their future in a free-market system. In towns like Bayan Uul in the Dornod province, Buryat communities were also uncertain of their past, as many men were exterminated in 1937-1939. On the one hand, the State pursued the policy of forgetting and erasing memories of repression from public spaces. On the other, fearing further repressions, the survivors were hiding their identity and often did not pass on their memories of repression to next generations. Shamans who could come out of hiding with the advent of democratisation, began to play a significant role in this uncertainty management.⁸ They blamed the angered spirits of ancestors for economic and existential failures that plagued communities during the transformation.

These spirits are divided into two categories: *ongon* – the spirits of ancestors who have not been fed nor have received sacrifices for years; and vampiric *üheer* – the spirits of people murdered during repressions and buried without rites that come to their descendants to hurt them. While an *ongon* is usually the spirit of a shaman or a mighty ancestor, anyone who has not passed through the appropriate funeral rites may become an *üheer*. Unlike ordinary ancestral spirits, *üheer* has no memory and no identity; it is unable to tell its story and cannot be appeased. It can be driven out for some time, with the help of a lama reciting Buddhist texts and prayers, but will return after some time. A person killed by the *üheer* becomes such a spirit. There is a shamanic ritual called *üheer haaah*, during which the spirit is lured into a leather bag and then left at a crossroads. Some try to confuse harmful spirits by moving to Ulaanbaatar, so that the spirits cannot find them. An innovative method is to change one's genealogy by

⁷ Khorloogiin Choibalsan (1985–1952) – Stalinist leader of Mongolia.

⁸ Since copying with uncertainty is one of the basic functions of shamans, it can be said that they have adapted their practices to new social conditions.

changing the data in the ID card and adopting the mother's patrilineage and her maiden name, following which the ghosts cease to be related to their victim, which makes access to the victims more difficult (Swancutt 2008: 846–860).⁹

Unfortunately, the spirit usually returns stronger and even more dangerous. The only sure way to get rid of an *ücheer* is to transform it into an *ongon* – a full-fledged ancestor spirit. To be able to perform the ritual shaman must first explain the story of such a spirit. To this end, the shaman conducts conversations and gathers memories, not only among the living but also among the ancestors' spirits, who, by sharing their experiences and remarks, allow to gradually reconstruct the past and reveal the identity of the *üheer* that has been haunting the family. By sacrificing rams to ancestral spirits, families receive memories and stories of the past in return. Spirits are not omniscient, but just like people they have their memories, their point of view and feelings (Manduhai 2013: 10–17).

Spirits, just like the people who are still alive, can only provide partial, subjective, and uncertain knowledge. Sometimes they lie and impersonate ancestors, so that people include them in their genealogy and make sacrifices to them (Swancutt 2008: 856). The reconstruction of genealogy is a meticulous, collective work involving the memory of the living and the spirits, through which people try to access the history that had been repressed and condemned to oblivion by the State. Spirits have sparked a growing interest in the family past, and the community's past, since the causes of present failures began to be seen as situated in the past, especially that related to repression and the period of oblivion. Stories told by spirits through the shaman's mouth create an interpretative framework for reconstructing the past and explaining the present. This process is very different from official historiography or public history generated by government institutions.

To pacify the ancestor's spirit it is necessary to identify it, place it in a precise genealogical order, as only then the shaman can make the sacrifices adequately. With the ongoing reconstruction of genealogy and family histories, ancestral spirits regain their identity and have the opportunity to share their experiences. The reconstruction of history begins with restoration of genealogy. Complementing the family tree involves revealing the identity of all ancestors, as well as finding a place where one can encounter the *ongon* and make offerings to it, determining the specific addresses of the spirit – *huudal buudal*, places where a person was born, died, was buried, as well as places where the spirit drinks water, plays, and strolls. Without these data, it is difficult for a shaman to come into direct contact with the spirit. Recalling ancestral spirits, their place in the genealogical structure, social position, and their biography is therefore combined with spatial practices, identification, and refuelling memories of the ancestral territories in which the ancestors lived and in which their spirits live. In the case of shaman spirits, one should also consider what title such spirits possess and which deity

⁹ This is similar to the practice I have observed in the field, where the spirit of the disease was transferred onto a dummy that is given the name and the clothes of the sick person, while the patient is now using a new name.

or mighty *Tengri* – the spirit of the celestial court (*Burhan Garval*) they serve. Their social status needs to be clarified. Without this, the ancestor's spirit is incomplete. The spirits regain their personality and can speak and tell a story through the shaman's mouth only when their descendants remember them, know their name, and offer them sacrifices. Before talking to the assembled people, the spirit, entering the shaman, demand that they introduce themselves, present their family identity, genealogy, place of origin, and the clan's battle-call. This is another level at which spirits stimulate the reconstruction of family stories (Manduhai 2013: 45–46).

The spirits of people murdered and buried without witnesses became forgotten ghosts. They have no identity and cannot speak, but they return, cause people to commit suicide, bring disease, death, insanity, alcoholism, and failure. Transforming a harmful *üheer* into an ancestral spirit requires its identification and knowledge of the cause, date and place of a person's death. Without finding the grave, which is often a site of mass execution, compelling metamorphosis, regaining subjectivity by the spirit is not possible (Manduhai 2013: 80–84). Therefore, spirits restore family and family memory and demand the disclosure of details, chronology, and toponymy of crimes committed by the State. *Ongons* are a spiritual form of family memory, while *üheers* illustrate total oblivion. Unable to enter a new reincarnation cycle or become an ancestor spirit, desperate and forgotten *üheers* demand attention; they want to restore their historicity and subjectivity. The transformation of *üheer* into *ongon* is a form of memory work (of both living and dead) and a form of reconstruction of history, achieved by explaining and locating the details of the crimes committed by the State eight decades ago.¹⁰

Local struggles with the communist past occur not only in cooperation with the spirits of ancestors. Many Inner Asian communities are trying to reassert temporal connections broken by Soviet modernisation, and while doing so, they seek assistance of posthuman persons.

The Altai princess

In 1993, on the Ukok plateau at the border between Mongolia and the Republic of Altai, an archaeological expedition from Novosibirsk dug up a burial mound, where they discovered a sarcophagus. Inside it, preserved in permafrost layer, rested the mummy of a young woman born 2500 years ago. The discovery sparked worldwide interest, and the mummy was transferred to Novosibirsk and later to the Moscow Science and Research Laboratory within the Museum of Lenin, where the body recovered from the ice was preserved using the method developed to preserve the corpse of the revolutionary leader.

¹⁰ A similar process of transformation (but achieved through Buddhist rituals) of anonymous bodies of mass execution victims into the ancestral guardian spirits was described by Anne Guillou in Cambodia (2014).

Shortly after discovering the burial site, the local population started referring to the recovered body as the Altai princess, the goddess – the foremother of all Altaians, and the White Lady (Alt. *Ak Kadyn*). Soon she became identified with *Ochi-Bala* – a heroine of an Altai epic who protects the entrance to the underworld, preventing evil entities from coming out onto the surface. Minor seismic tremors felt during the exhumation of the body were interpreted as a warning from the princess, whose peace has been disturbed. Altai shamans, consulting with Altai khans' spirits, announced that the princess demands to be once again placed in her grave and never again taken from the Altai. Violation of the princess' will was feared to cause terrible consequences. At the same time, there were protests, aiming to halt archaeological works in the region. In 1998, the authorities decided to prohibit excavations throughout the Altai Republic for ten years (Halemba 2008: 284–295).

All the while, the princess's body, despite the Altaians' demands, was studied at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk. In 2003, a strong earthquake occurred in the Altai Republic, which was interpreted as a sign of the princess's anger. Nearly two thousand buildings were destroyed, and the village of Beltir was levelled completely. The earthquake was felt within a 1000 km radius from its epicentre and reached as far as Novosibirsk. The documentary film by Aliona Zharovska *Revenge of the Altai princess* (2006) presented the position of opponents of the archaeological excavations. Altaians were appalled by the fact that archaeologists thawed the permafrost in the tomb using boiling water. Koke Talkybaeva lamented: 'When I think about them pouring hot water on her, I am unable to calm down for the entire night. She was crying so much, and no one could help her in that terrible moment.' Rumours have it that the hot water destroyed the princess's beautiful face. Local historian Akai Kynyiev stated the following:

Let the archaeologists dig up their mothers and bring them here – place them on a table before me. Then I will say – okay, now go and dig (...) If we were savages not caring for history and not familiar with our ancestors, we would have dug up these kurgans long ago, extracted the gold, and melted it. However, we have not done so, and we protect those kurgans. Our shamans have foretold that if this burial site is not restored to its original state, there will be natural disasters, cataclysms in Altai, and these cataclysms will spread all over the Earth.

Shaman Kurtunak Unutov added to the historians' words: 'These misfortunes in Altai will never end, and it will only get worse. It is necessary to see the princess return as quickly as possible.' The elderly Klavdia Samtakova stated: 'They took that girl away to Novosibirsk – they study her, show her to the whole world – naked! This is why the spirit of the princess is so outraged.' In the opinion of certain Altaians, the signs of the princess's wrath could be felt nationwide. Several days after her removal from the kurgan, a coup d'état occurred in Moscow, and after the first public exhibition of the Ak Kadyn's body, the war in Chechnya began.

The film was harshly criticized by the Novosibirsk archaeologists, who considered the Altaians' claims to be ridiculous. In their opinion, anthropological and genetic studies have shown that the mummy in the kurgan, characteristic of the Pazyryk culture, is representative of the European race and in no way can be considered an ancestor to the Altaians – representatives of the Mongoloid race. Additionally, it is impossible to deem her a princess – judging by the grave's furnishings, the woman belonged to a slightly lower social class. Archaeologists pointed out that during Soviet times they have dug up many mummies, and no one ever interfered (Kazarina, Voroncov 2007).

As a result of the Altai people's mass protests in 2014, a new wing of the museum was built in the Altai Republic's capital, and the sarcophagus with princess Ak Kadyn's mummy was transported to Gorno-Altaysk. This compromise did not satisfy everyone. The shamans continued to demand that the princess should be returned to the tomb on the Ukok plateau. Following the flood in 2014, the Altai Council of Elders decided to bury the princess once again. However, the museum refused to release her 'biological remains', because legally, they belonged to the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk, and the decision to re-bury the remains was the sole discretion of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation.

Between 2012–2014, shamans performed offering rituals for Ak Kadyn on the Ukok Plateau and in the museum, asking the princess to calm down and prevent more disasters. Shaman Klara Kypchakova contacts the princess through dreams and relates messages from her. She has warned that if her body is not buried again, global disasters will begin in 2014. During the rituals, Ak Kadyn also speaks through shamans' mouths – she gives people two years to restore her body to the Ukok Plateau's grave. The current War in Ukraine and the economic sanctions against Russia were also interpreted as signs of Ak Kadyn's anger (Doronin 2016: 78–79). In 2015, a determined shaman and president of the Spiritual Centre of Turks, Akai Kine, filed a lawsuit against the museum, demanding the burial of the princess Ak Kadyn, sacred to the Altaians. The court dismissed the case, which was then appealed (Belov 2016).

After returning to Altai, the princess began to inform the shamans about her biography and detailed stories of the wars led by the Altai people. Princess can be asked questions. The auxiliary spirits of some shamans also provided additional explanations and information about the princess's life, her army, and the history of the Altaians. Then, the shamans met and reconstructed the past by exchanging these narratives. The princess's messages, supreme deity Altai Kudai and origin spirits transmitted during shamanic trances are recorded by special scribes (alt. *bičikči*) and distributed on the Internet (Doronin 2016: 85–88). In this way, the Altaians' shamanic history, an alternative to conventional historiography, has been created.

The two forms of the understanding of history and heritage, represented by Russian archaeologists and native activists are highlighted by the dispute about the ownership of the past, i.e. who has the right to give it meaning, and make

decisions concerning archaeological artefacts. We are dealing here with competing ideas on the status of archaeological findings as (1) the world cultural heritage of humanity, (2) national heritage (3) the heritage of an ethnic group (cf. Gillman 2010: 141–195). It is noteworthy that similar types of conflicts regarding archaeological findings and funerary equipment have been taking place for years between Native American organisations and government institutions in the USA (Vincent 2005: 33–44). It is significant, in this particular case, that the Russian archaeologists persistently deny the Altai people's right to decide the fate of burial sites found on their territory. They recognise the right to heritage only within limits set by scientific knowledge. Opposing the Altai claims, the archaeologists have attempted to protect the privileged status and the authority of their discipline, which archaeology enjoyed during the Soviet period (Reeves, Plets 2015: 210–211). Undermining the archeologists' authority may be considered an attempt to decolonise the practice of archaeology, which throughout the decades have used archaeological findings to objectify the Altaians in a series of ethnogenetic reconstructions, often denying them the right to connect and identify with 'genetically diverse' archaeological cultures (Konstantinov et al. 2013: 81–91). Employing stories told by ancestral spirits and guardian spirits of places, including the embodied spirit of Ak Kadyr, ethno-national activists incorporate ancient Scythian culture into the national Altai history, thereby strengthening the political position of the Altaians as long-term inhabitants of the region. It is highly possible that, in the primary interpretive framework, the Altai people had opposed the excavations out of fear of spirits' anger, but then the Altai politicians transposed these concerns into the secondary framework – the dispute over the past and rights to the land.

Marshal Sahlins would surely call the actions of Altai activists 'mythopraxis', i.e. the introduction of myth into social practice (Sahlins 1985: 54–72). Mythopraxis opposes the Russian historical narrative's hegemony and helps the Altaians regain their subjectivity, situate themselves in history, and rebuild their ethno-national identity. The mythical practice also undermines the linear irreversibility of time, in which archaeological relics and human remains, become passive tropes of the past. Due to the animistic relation with the agency of the 'necropersona,' the Altaians create their own, non-modern history, which certainly should be considered as a decolonising practice (cf. Domańska 2017a: 53–63). The mummy, identified with the personage from the Altai mythology, has become a nodal point that shapes alternative representations of the past and the future. Altaians have nationalised the mummy, thereby creating their heritage concept as a subjective entity imbued with great power, which should remain *in situ*. It is used to negotiated identity, values, and the group's place in society. The agentive dead body becomes the subject of Altai necropolicy, in the process of which the Altaians themselves strengthen their political subjectivity.¹¹

¹¹ Similar forms of mythical practices are characteristic of post-colonial relations and contain within them a significant emancipative potential (cf. Przytomka 2015).

For the Altaians, the princess is not only a source of agency. The mummy also has agency itself and, even though dead, is alive and functions as an active agent of the public past and present. The animistic vocabulary was introduced into the public discourse and became an inherent part of local nationalism. For their part, the shamans have adapted an environmentalist vocabulary to make their point in public. In mid-April 2020, the Altai Republic remained the only region of the Russian Federation in which COVID-19 infection case had not yet been identified. One of the members of the republican parliament Erzhanat Begenov announced in the media that Altai is under the protection of the princess from the Ukok plateau (Pavlova 2020). At the same time, the shamans from the White Faith movement began mediation with the spirit of the disease, trying to negotiate the terms of saving the Altai population and all humanity.¹² One of the shamans told anthropologist Dimitri Doronin that “the forests are the lungs of the planet, and since man has cut down many forests in recent years, nature gives a sign to change his mind and punishes him the same because the virus infects the human lungs” (Doronin 2020).

The ‘corpse of contention’ in this story has an ambivalent character. On the one hand, traditionally, Altaians hold a shared belief in the danger of corpses and burial sites because of their claim that *uzut* – one of the dead person’s souls could transform into *kara neme* – a vampiric predator that can devour human vital force – *qut, süne* (Baskakov 1973: 108–113). On the other hand, the spirits of shamans, khans, and powerful ancestors support families’ life force and help living descendants who remember them and make offerings. Initially, the Altaians have been opposing the excavations because they created a threat from angry spirits. Identifying the mummy with the mythical figure of *Ochi-Bala*, which protects the sealed gates to the underworld, has raised new fears – hence the demand that the princess be returned to her tomb. The material body of a person belonging to mythology serves as the proof of the visions of the past created by shamans and spirits. The princess herself became an active narrator of the past, a vital co-creator of the native regime of historicity. As a result, the mythical figures were identified with the ancient Scythians, the Altaians gained the necessary historical depth, and archaeologists were banned from conducting excavations – they lost their monopoly on shaping local history and the right to disturb spirits. The Altaians appropriated selected elements of archaeological knowledge and incorporated them into their mythopraxis. The posthuman actant agency could be considered a distinctive feature of shamanism, were it not for the fact that another powerful necropersona in Inner Asia is a Buddhist monk.

¹² White Faith (alt. *Ak Janj*) – a syncretic religious movement which absorbed elements of Buddhism and shamanism, that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century. It had a clearly millenarian and anti-colonial character. The leaders of the movement promoted unification of all Siberian Turks (Halemba 2006: 28–32).

The undead lama

In 2002, a Buddhist monk, whose body remained hidden for 75 years, was discovered in Buryatia. It is the most peculiar and indeed the most inspiring display of spiritual treasure found in many years. According to the official biography, in June 1927, the former Khambo-lama – leader of the Buryat Buddhists, gathered his disciples, sat in a lotus position, and declared that he would soon die. He ordered them to bury his body in a meditative position and promised that he would return in 75 years time, after which he immersed himself in meditation and ceased to breathe. His body was buried in a wooden chest in a remote place. After the war, in 1955 and 1973, subsequent Khambo-lamas would in secret uncover the sarcophagus containing the body of their predecessor and change his robes, perform rituals, and bury it again. In 2002 Khambo-lama Damba Ayusheyev found the body of lama Dashi-Dorzho Itigilov and moved it with honours to the central Ivolginsky monastery. In 2008, a special temple was built for the body, where followers may worship it during the main Buddhist holidays. According to Ayusheyev, Itigilov is still alive and is in a state of deep meditation, which is evidence of his high spiritual development. The Khambo-lama calls the undead body ‘the spiritual heritage of Buryats and evidence of the endurance of Buddhism and the Buryat culture (Jawłowski 2015: 187).

In July 2013, I had the opportunity to take part in the rites of bowing to the body during the holiday of Buddha Maitreya. Thousands of Buryats and hundreds of visitors from Russia and abroad waited for hours in the burning sun to stand for a few seconds in front of the undead body sat upon the throne. They were performing prostrations, whisper wishes and prayers. Many of them came to see with their own eyes if the body really looked as if it were alive. Since that time, the undead body has become even more popular. It has become the subject of several documentary films, scientific examinations of tissue samples have been performed, Vladimir Putin has had a face-to-face conversation with the body, and President Medvedev bowed to it. The image of the immortal Itigilov can be seen on most kitchen fridges and home altars in Buryatia. In October 2016, the *Burjaad Ünen* (Buryat Truth) newspaper reported that cameras inside the temple have registered the body moving during night hours (Alsuev 2016). During a videoconference, Khambo-lama Ayusheyev announced:

I was astonished by these images – even though somewhere deep within my spirit I allowed for such a possibility, I was nevertheless not prepared for it (...) One of the great teachers from India, Lharamba lama foretold, that Itigilov would arise from a resting place when the time comes for the arrival of a new Buddha – Maitreya (Ân 2016).

The return of lama Itigilov was connected with prior discoveries of Buddhist artefacts, such as statuettes of Buddhas from the Anin Monastery. The findings began to be interpreted as the result of the will of Itigilov, who has chosen this way to communicate to the Buryats that the time of rebirth for Buddhist

traditions has come. The undead body symbolises the endurance of Buryat spirituality and demonstrates exceptional agency. As a 'living heritage,' it gives advice and warns the inhabitants of Eastern Siberia. It communicates with them through dreams, findings, and recordings from CCTV cameras. In 2005, the newspaper "Moscow Komsomolets in Buryatia" attributed several extraordinary events to the undead lama, such as the miraculous rescue of Anatoly Chubais in an unsuccessful assassination attempt or the nomination of the ethnic Buryat – Yuri Yekhanurov for the post of the prime minister of Ukraine (Amogolonova 2012: 68).

Posthumously meditating lama is not an isolated case in Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhism. It is believed that highly realised yogis can control their body's energies during the dying process and experience 'transparent light,' rest in 'naked awareness' while maintaining consciousness in the heart centre. It is widely thought that the so-called *tukdam* meditation can be continued after death (Nydhal 2012: 193–212). Anya Bernstein pointed out that Itigilov's return fits into another tradition – finding Buddhist deposits, that had been hidden by ancient masters to save them from destruction (Bernstein 2013: 95–100). Tradition holds that the Indian master Padmasambhava, anticipating persecutions of Buddhists by the Tibetan king Lang Darma, hid some texts and relics. When the persecution ended in the twelfth century and people again turned to the teachings of the Buddha, these 'hidden treasures' (Tib. *terma*) began to be found by reincarnations of twenty-five main students of Master Padmasambhava, the so-called treasure explorers – *terton*. Finding treasures has become a way to legitimise innovation and renewal of the continuity of Buddhist teachings transmission (Androsov 2011: 358–359).

Consequently, the trauma of religious persecution and rupture with tradition is embedded in the Buddhist regime of historicity, which acquires new meanings. Bolshevik persecutions have been included in the cyclic structure of Buddha's teachings' disappearance and rebirth. By finding the incorruptible body of Itigilov, Stalinist repressions become a repetition of Buddhism's persecution initiated by the Tibetan king Langdarma in the 9th century, and the Buddhist transmission hidden during the persecution appears as soon as the adverse circumstances cease. The undead lama restores continuity to the broken bonds of history.

Similarly to the Altai princess, the undead body of Khambo-lama Itigilov has been extracted from the depths of the Earth shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union – during the liminal period which saw the lively renegotiation of a new social order and inter-ethnic relations, as well as the relations between the titular minority and the State. The Buddhist necropersona has no less agency than the shamanic one from Altai. Itigilov and Ak Kadyn perform similar social functions: they integrate and mobilise indigenous groups around the native notion of the past. The undead chthonic bodies have become powerful symbols of the vitality and authenticity of native cultures; they have made it possible to reinterpret identity and ethnicity, to step beyond the rigid framework of Soviet historiography. At the same time, the 'ancestors' excavated

from the ground have confirmed the right to land, pointing to pre-Soviet heritage, thereby becoming keystones of history, making it possible to overcome the postsocialist identity crisis.

Conclusions

During the Soviet modernisation, animist practices were marginalised and forced out of the public sphere. There was a hierarchy of knowledge in which academic cognition was strictly separated from 'religious superstition.' Since 1990, Soviet historiography has been criticised for being over-ideologised. Ethno-national historiographies have come to change this outdated paradigm, responding to the demand for new axes of social identity and new instruments of institution-building. Alongside the simultaneous proliferation of the so-called ethnic revivals and new paradigms in the humanities, i.e., subaltern studies or memory studies, the idea of historical truth has been replaced by social – including historical – justice. The Western regime of historicity has lost its privileged position and is now often included in local, hybrid, postmodern, and post-secular representations of the past. Alternatively to post-Soviet historiography and public history produced under the government's gaze, there are emerging native regimes of historicity.

In Inner Asia, we can observe the phenomenon of animistic intrusion upon modern institutions, i.e., museums, heritage, history, archaeology. Posthuman agents have been involved in mythopraxis, through which native regimes of historicity are established. The cases discussed in this paper represent three types of relationships between conventional historiography and animism: (1) a separate alternative to the official history that emerges when people work with shamans to reconstruct the past and regain the subjectivity of their murdered ancestors, (2) confrontation and appropriation when Altaians expel archaeologists, take the mummy from them and incorporate her into their mythology, (3) reframing, when history is inscribed in the Buddhist cyclical continuum that stretches back to the ninth century Tibet. All three can be considered manifestations of epistemic disobedience that calls into question the foundation of hegemonic Western historiography and creates an opportunity to empower local knowledge and native political interests (Mignolo as cited in Domańska 2017b: 45–48). Together with people who consider themselves their descendants, nonhuman actants pose a growing challenge for professional historians and institutions that implement State politics of memory.

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SUMMARY

Post-socialist animism: personhood, necro-personas and public past in Inner Asia

This paper investigates the relationship between animism and public past in post-socialist Inner Asia. The analysis was based on *three case studies* highlighting key features of the relationship between local conceptions of personhood, non-human agency, and their role in structuring native visions of the past: (1) negotiations between families and the spirits of their ancestors – victims of communist purges in Mongolia, (2) a powerful necro-persona that allows local communities to gain political subjectivity and undermine conventional post-Soviet historical narratives, and (3) the return of the undead lama Itgilov that caused Buddhist revival in Buryatia. Posthuman agents have been involved in mythopraxis, through which native regimes of historicity are established.

Keywords: personhood, animism, necro-persona, mythopraxis, public past, Inner Asia