

**GESAR AND MONGOLIAN SHAMANISMS AS PARALLEL REVIVALS
OF INDIGENOUS PRACTICES AND IDENTITY IN CENTRAL AND INNER ASIA**

Abstract. The 20th century was a global period of deep and continual turmoil, especially in Inner Asia. While the western world experienced periods of peace between and after the World Wars, Inner Asia was under continual turmoil from the mid 20th century until the very end. In Mongolia, independence in 1911, the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, and shifts in communist government until the democratic shift of 1989, followed by the economic collapse of 1994 have left permanent scars on the national Psyche. In Tibet, coming under communist control in 1958, the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976 and since being occasionally punctuated by massive and often violent protests have likewise served to permanently mark the society psyche. However, in both societies there has been a revival of indigenous practices after such periods of intense repression and cultural loss. In this paper, I will explore the parallel revivals of the Mongolian indigenous practice of Böö Mörgöl (commonly known as “Mongolian Shamanism” or “Tengerism”) primarily in Ulaanbaatar, but also in more rural areas of Mongolia, with the revival of the Gesar cultural and religious practices in Tibet, concentrating on the Yushu (yul shul), Nangchen (nang chen) and Dege (sde dge) regions of Kham (khams), and the Golok (mgo log) region of Amdo (a mdo).

Keywords: cultural crisis, traditional culture, Tibet, Mongolia, Gesar of Ling, Böö Mörgöl

Introduction

Across the world in the late 20th and early 21st century, numerous cultures have seen a revival of indigenous practices. These revivals often occur during the period of sudden liberalization that comes after extreme repression. Such incidences have occurred with the revival of Shamanism in Korea after the end of the Japanese occupation and dictatorship period, Nepalese shamanism after the Nepali Civil War, and Sun Dances after the legalization of Native American spiritual practices in the 1970s in the United States, among others. In this paper, I will concentrate on two specific examples: The revival of Gesar practices in Kham and Amdo after the end of the Cultural Revolution in China and the revival of Böö Mörgöl following democratization in Mongolia.

One especially fascinating aspect of these revivals is how many are based on involuntary or semi-involuntary practices, which is to say that the practitioner does not partake through conscious control or desire. These can be such things as spontaneous visions, trance, and spirit possession. These would include Trance Recitation of Gesar or becoming a Shaman in Mongolia.

Such revivals often appear a step backwards, in the face of modernization, and even an uphill battle when faced by globalizing forces and the constant influx of Christian missionaries to both locations. Even locals question the validity of these revivals. Many young Tibetans question the sudden growth in numbers of tertons (Thubten Dharje, Phone Interview)¹ and According to many northern Mongols², renowned for their shamans, there are no true shamans left, causing them to question how a revival is possible and how the current one is occurring (Buyandelgeriyn, 133)³. Therefore, these incidences say a lot about the significance of culture and personal identity at both the conscious and subconscious level as well as the need to retain cultural indigenous identity at all costs. Looking at these subconscious revivals can also indicate a great deal about what defines a people's culture and how they define themselves.

In this paper, I will compare the parallel revivals of Böö Mörgöl and Gesar practices in Tibet as a reflection of rebuilding and strengthening national identity after a period of cultural crisis.

¹ Terton Thubten Dharje (gter ston thub bstan dar rgyas), Telephone Interview. “Validity of Tertons and Termas.” 25 Mar. 2020.

² In discussion of Böö Mörgöl, the northern Mongols generally refer to the Dukha, Darhad or Buryat tribes.

³ Buyandelgeriyn, Manduhai. "Dealing with Uncertainty: Shamans, Marginal Capitalism, and the Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia." *American Ethnologist* 34.1 (2007): 127-47.

Post Liberalization “Slump” in Inner Asia

Following a period of harsh cultural repression, newly liberalized communities commonly experience a time of great social difficulty¹. This period is frequently referenced in scholarly works, but as yet does not have a label to my knowledge. Lacking a better name, I have chosen to refer to it as “the Slump.” This period is especially distinct in Mongolia, and slightly less so in Tibet.

This is a period, after the repression has ended and personal and cultural liberties have been restored, during which many social norms seem to fall apart (Pederson, 2011). It is generally categorized by a pattern of domestic violence, substance abuse (primarily alcoholism although drug abuse is common as well), and suicide², all of which are seen in Mongolia and too a lesser extent, Tibet. Making a comparison to the Kham and Golok regions of Tibet is difficult as the two are regions not countries. Likewise, one could argue that while there has been some liberalization, it is not enough to sufficiently trigger this slump.

Research methods

In order to conduct this research, I primarily relied on my own field work in Mongolia, Tibet, and neighboring Himalayan and Inner Asian societies. For Tibetan research, I lived in a Tibetan settlement in North India for three years from 2009 to 2012, with ongoing visits up to the present, a Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan enclave of Kathmandu (Boudha) for a year and a half from 2018-2020, and travelling repeatedly to Tibet, spending approximately a year in the Kham region of Eastern Tibet. I have also observed *Gesar Tsokpa* (ge sar tshogs pa), or Gesar Organizations, both in Tibet and abroad.

For field research on Böö Mörgöl, I conducted numerous research trips between 2013 and 2015, living with a family of shamanic practitioners and shamans in Ulaanbaatar. From 2015 to 2018, I lived in Mongolia working alongside both Urban shamans and northern shamans of the Darkhad and Dukha³ tribes. During this participatory observation period, I not only attended and recorded ceremonies, but acted as a Tushee, or ritual attendant, for both city shamans and Darkhad shamans.

Finding literature on both subjects proved challenging. Scholarly work that examines the actual practices of Böö Mörgöl, as opposed to the anthropological or sociological contexts, proved even more challenging. Most of these works, such as the works of Sarangerel, while technically accurate in their descriptions of ceremonies, initiations, and sacred songs were written to target the new-age crowd. As such, I had to read these books with some skepticism with regards to their reliability. However, Sarangerel’s descriptions of ceremonies were quite accurate and so I use these works to complement my own fieldwork observations and to triangulate my evidence and arrive at credible findings.

The Tale of King Gesar of Ling

The Epic of King Gesar of Ling, is believed to be approximately 900 years old. Although the veracity of his existence is debated, historical references to similar political activities exist (David-Neel and Yongden, 1934)⁴. Some Gesar Scholars believe that Gesar was a real figure whose activities were exaggerated over time (Orgyen, 2013)⁵.

The poem is widely considered to be the longest epic poem in the world. The exact length is difficult to determine that, due to such beliefs as Terma (gter ma)⁶ and reincarnation, the poem can continue to expand in a way that is declared canonical. Due to the Tibetan belief in reincarnation, Tibetans feel that many figures

¹ Pedersen, Morten Axel. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011. Print.

Drukmo Kyi. Personal interview. Jan. 2015.

Marat, Erica. "Imagined Past, Uncertain Future: The Creation of National Ideologies in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan." *Problems of Post-Communism* 55.1 (2008): 12-24. Print.

² Buyandelgeriyin; 2007, 129.

³ The tribe of reindeer herders of the far north of Khuvsgul, the Taiga region. More commonly known as the “Tsaatan”, which literally means the “Reindeer People” the Dukha prefer their own name based on the Tuvan language rather than “Tsaatan” which they view as derogatory as it implies they are literally people with reindeer antlers.

⁴ David-Neel, Alexandra, and Lama Yongden. *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*. New York: Claude Kendall, 1934. Print.

⁵ Orgyen Trinley Dorje, The 17th Karmapa Lama. E-mail interview. Jan. 2013

⁶ Terma are sacred texts or revelations, believed to be hidden physically or magically by realized masters. Physical forms would include things such as a book hidden in a cave while metaphysical forms would include things like *gongter*, “mental treasures” that may appear in a realized teacher’s mind through visions or dreams.

of the poem are once again alive today (Yangzom et al. 2012¹; David-Neel and Yongden, 39, 1934). Some of these recognized tulkus² have contributed to the poem by composing new volumes. Most Tibetan devotees of the poem consider these volumes to be canon because they are based on equally canonical concepts. While counts vary, depending on region and which sections are considered valid, modest estimates place the poem at twenty-million words, while more generous scholars, who include all of the terma, place the number closer to forty-million.

The Epic of Gesar of Ling tells the story of a conquering king through the framework of the early struggle for Buddha Dharma to thrive in Tibet. Gesar is an incarnation of the bodhisattva Thopagawa (thos pa dga' ba), sent to earth by Guru Padmasambhava, the saint who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet. His earthly birth is solely for the purpose of slaying the demons who have been born on earth in order to destroy the Dharma.

While different regions tell the poem differently, and consider different stories canon, all tell the story of the horse race, the battles against the demons, and the Hor-Ling battle. The most famous versions of the poem are found in Mongolia, Ladakh and Tibet³, with the eastern Tibetan versions being the most extensive (David-Neel, 3).

A Brief Summary of Gesar Practices

Gesar has been a massive cultural influence, both religious and secular, on the lives of young Tibetans, especially in Kham and Amdo. For example, the largest hotel in Yushu, one of the biggest cities in Kham and a major trade center in eastern Tibet is the Gesar palace hotel. The hotel owner, Adrak, comes from a family devoted to Tana monastery. Having established the hotel, he converted the top floor into a satellite temple for Tana, known as the Tana Gesar Gonkhang (rta na'i ge sar dgon khang). He also sponsors two lamas to reside full time at the monastery⁴. Not only has the Gesar hotel become a major landmark in Yushu, but also is used for major events. It is one of four major locations for weddings. Furthermore, they host Gesar devotional projects such as an expo of Gesar artifacts from Tana monastery showcasing armor, jewelry, texts, thangkas, and more. Other examples of Gesar in popular influence would be the Ling Gesar restaurant in Xining, or the song Alalamo, the number one Hip Hop song in Tibet in 2017.

Religiously, Gesar forms the basis for a series of Vajrayana practices within the Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions. According to some teachings, Ju Mipham Rinpoche, Gesar is an emanation of Guru Rinpoche directly⁵. All of the major characters of the epic are also manifestations or emanations of major Buddhist deities or Bodhisattvas: Sengjam Drugmo as Tara, Trothung as Hayagriva/Red Tamdrin, and so forth.

A major religio-geographical center of Gesar Vajrayana practice is the aforementioned monastery in the Nangchen region of Kham. The last Yelpa Kagyü (Yel pa bka' rgyud) monasteries in Tibet, Tana holds as a mark of pride that one of their prime Ngagpas, Lang Amnye Jangchub Drenköl (rlangs a myes byang chub 'dre bkol) is held to be King Gesar's root teacher (rtsa wa'i bla ma.) As such, their temple considers itself, and is widely considered in Kham, to be the authentic holder of Gesar tradition. Tana has numerous shrines to different aspects of Gesar, and most notably, the Stupas of the Thirty Heroes and a warehouse full of artifacts that allegedly belonged to Gesar and his retinue⁶.

The most involuntary practice of Gesar is that of the Babdrung ('bab sgrung), or Gesar trance bards. Recently, there has been a rise in incidences of spontaneous Gesar trance. Although cases differ, one common theme is falling asleep in the mountains. Tibetan mountains are believed to have a spiritual soul, identical to

¹ Yangzom, Pema. Personal interview. Dec. 2012. (Plus three anonymous companions)

² A tulku is a person of high realization who manages to maintain some control over their incarnation. They are considered a direct incarnation of their predecessor.

³ For information on the Ladakhi and Mongolian versions, see A.H. Francke's "A Lower Ladakhi Version of the Gesar Saga" and Zara Wallace's "Gesar!: The Epic Tale of Tibet's Great Warrior-King."

⁴ Adrak, Personal Interview. Yushu, Qinghai, China. 2018

⁵ Mipham Rinpoche. /rig pa 'gyur med ye shes kyi skyes bu chen po'I bla ma'I rnal 'byor rlabs myur 'jug ces by aba bzhugs so// "A Method for Quickly Entering the Stream of Blessings of the Guru Yoga of Gesar, who is the Unchanging Wisdom of Awareness." Trans. Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal and Carl Stuenkel. Boulder, CO: Dharma Samudra, 1994. Print.

⁶ Apen Trulku, Personal Interview. Yushu, Qinghai, China. August 2018.

the concept of *savdag* in Mongolia¹. A person would go up into the mountains for herding, fall asleep and wake up able to recite the epic of Gesar (Tsewang, 2012²; Dakpa, 2012).

These cases are widespread in Eastern Tibet and have started occurring at an unprecedented rate since the early 1980s (Ringu, 2012)³, yet they are unheard of in exile. The seeming explosion of spontaneous Gesar transmission, following the relaxation of restrictions after the Cultural Revolution, seems to believers evidence that Gesar is personally⁴ trying to revive Tibetan culture through bringing his spirit to his people. For Tibetans, by causing these trances, he forces an involuntary involvement in the revival of Tibetan traditional culture and belief in twenty-first century Tibet.

Mongolian Urbanization

Böö Mörgöl, like most global shamanistic systems, is generally seen as a rural practice, to be done in the mountains or forests. But forced urbanization has led to a situation whereby roughly 50% of Mongolians live in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. From 1921 through 1989, Mongolia was an unofficial satellite state of the USSR. Although technically an independent socialist state after the revolution led by Sukhbaatar, in reality Mongolia was controlled remotely by the hand of Moscow. By the end of the Soviet/Socialist era, the USSR was providing one third of Mongolia's GDP⁵. When Mongolians revolted in 1989, bringing about Mongolian democratization in 1990, this accompanied by the collapse of the USSR brought about the first of a series of economic shocks. The next would be in 1993 when the World Bank demanded sudden decollectivization in a process known as "Shock Therapy" which caused mass poverty in the country side (Mortenson, 22), and most recently a series of *zud*, or extreme winters which have killed off the livestock of thousands of Mongolian herders⁶.

The result has been a city with 272 people per square kilometer, many, if not most, of whom are migrants from the countryside. The city is split into nine districts and 121 Khoroo, or sub-districts. Unlike many western countries, which will have an urban, suburban, and rural area, the split in Ulaanbaatar is unique to central Asia. Within the city limits exist two styles of living, "city" (höt) and "ger district" (ger khoroolol).

63% of Ulaanbaatar's population resides in these Ger Districts, largely built without urban planning and without running water. Residents warm their homes with antique-style iron stoves, in which they burn whatever they can find. It is, therefore, no surprise that the ger districts contribute 84% of Ulaanbaatar's air pollution.⁷

A Brief Introduction to Böö Mörgöl

Although there is no standardization of Böö Mörgöl or the Siberian Shamanic traditions, there is a basic universal framework of belief⁸. All power comes from *Tenger*, or the eternal blue sky. Tenger is an omniscient deity and the One True God in the Western sense. In that sense, Böö Mörgöl is essentially a monotheistic practice. Tenger's power is then channeled through *ongod*, or spirits, who live in the heavens or directly interact with them. A spirit may possess an *ulaach*, which is a shaman-as-medium. From there, the spirit directly interacts with the petitioner.

Western so-called "neo shamans", as defined by the likes of Michael Harner⁹, have an alternate viewpoint whereby "There are two types of shamans—those who have been initiated by the earth, and those who have been trained by other shamans."¹⁰ This popular mindset among western new-age believers allows

¹ *Savdag* is a Mongolian cognate of the Tibetan word "*sa bdag*"

² Tsewang Nyima. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

³ Ringu Tulku. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

⁴ The idea of Gesar's personal intercession is far from uncommon. When I began the research for this paper and was struggling to find funding to travel, numerous Tibetans told me that, since Gesar was a protector and I was honoring Gesar, Gesar would find a way for me to get the money. During my early research, many Tibetans attributed my bouts of good luck to Gesar, saying "Gesar came to Seattle!"

⁵ Weidman, John C. and Brian Yoder, "Policy and Practice in Education Reform in Mongolia and Uzbekistan during the First Two Decades of the Post-Soviet Era" *Excellence in Higher Education* 1 (2010):57-68 (57)

⁶ "Mongolia" City Populations <http://www.citypopulation.de/Mongolia.html>

⁷ Geminiano, Chris. "Norovsuren: Ger Districts Will Not Exist in the Future." *The UB Post*. N.p., 7 Aug. 2014. Web. <<http://ubpost.mongolnews.mn/?p=11230>>.

⁸ Buyandelger, Pederson, Sarangerel, Eliade etc.

⁹ Harner, Michael. *The Way of the Shaman*. 1980, new edition, Harper San Francisco, 1990.

¹⁰ Kelly, John Farrell "Entering Water: Sea Lion Shamanism" *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* Vol 6, no.2 June 2012 56-76 (56).

these neo-shamans to declare themselves. However, this is in complete opposition to most shamanic societies, including those of the Mongolian and Siberian areas. For them, one does not choose to become a shaman. Instead, shamans are supposed to be “chosen by the spirits.” This choosing is usually accompanied by a strange shamanic illness. The illness may have physical or psychological symptoms, or even be a bout of unusually bad luck (Buyandelgeriyn, 2007 135). After the potential shaman is not healed by doctors or lamas they will in desperation usually turn to a shaman. The shaman’s spirits will then diagnose the person as a shaman-to-be and that in order to be healed they must accept their calling and take on their spirits. A more senior shaman will guide them in learning how to be a shaman and conduct ceremonies.

Böö Mörgöl was outlawed during the Socialist period. Although monasteries were restricted and many were shut down and destroyed (Buyandelgeriyn; 2007, 133.), the Soviets understood that a hierarchical and organized religion such as Buddhism could be both controlled and a source of control over the population. Böö Mörgöl, with its “feral” and uncontrollable characteristics, on the other hand, was clamped down upon.

However, since the 1990 democratic revolution in Mongolia, shamanism has undergone a massive resurgence¹. With it has returned the role of the shaman as a storyteller, holder of histories and holder of genealogies. For many families, forced to burn their written genealogies to save themselves from the soviet purges, the shaman remains the only way to recreate a history, which now stops with the last living relative’s furthest memories. The shaman helps recreate these genealogies through the ritual songs of address, which included birthplaces, ancestral names, the names of children and so forth (Buyandelger, 1.945). Although these may be imagined histories, the shaman’s songs and oral transmission of the so-called genealogy serve to connect the Mongolian people to a history stolen by the Socialist period.

Discussion

The 21st century is unprecedented in its globalization. Everyone chats with people around the world in the blink of an eye. K-Pop influences fashion all over the world and Kanye West is quoted by people who can’t speak English. In times like these, why are so many of these same young generations taking a vested interest in indigenous practices? Why are so many young people suddenly caught up in the consciously involuntary practices of spirit possession and trance, which even practitioners often view as embarrassing and old-fashioned? In both the cases of Gesar and Böö Mörgöl, the practices and values stand in opposition to the struggle that both regions are currently waging for an industrial modernity. Why, then do such revivals hold importance in the lives of Tibetan and Mongolian people?

We have already established that these revivals have occurred in the period following times of great political turmoil and cultural repression. But aside from the time in which they occurred, these revivals share a great deal of other aspects in common. Both have crossovers into environmental protections of areas that, while traditionally preserved are now under threat due to economic pressures. Both traditions stem from an inherent power in the actual land and indigenous people themselves. Finally, both represent great periods of imperial glory. In a combination of all of these and other factors, both play a major role in creating one idea of nationalism.

Lay support for both practices is likewise mixed based on more modern influence. While Gesar practices are encouraged among the older schools of Buddhism, the most populous school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa, generally strongly discourages it. Reciting Gesar in Nechung monastery is banned² and in parts of Western Tibet where Gelugpa practice is stronger, Gesar practice is discouraged and feared³. Even in Gelugpa strongholds in eastern Tibet, surrounded by Gesar practicing areas, Gesar is viewed negatively. In speaking to one Tibetan with a doctorate, he became frustrated and slightly angry that I would “waste” my time in studying something that was so clearly false.

¹ Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam. "Shamans Emerging Form Repression in Siberia: Lightning Rods of Fear and Hope." *Shamans and Violence*. Ed. Diana Riboli and Davide Torri. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. N. pag. Print.

Buyandelger, Manduhai. *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2013. Print.

Pedersen, Morten Axel. *Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011. Print.

Sarangerel. *Riding Windhorses: A Journey into the Heart of Mongolian Shamanism*. Rochester, VT: Destiny, 2000. Print

² Dabhe, Personal Interviews. March-April 2012.

³ Tsering, Pasang. Personal interview. Dec. 2012.

Likewise, Böö Mörgöl is discouraged by many Mongolian youth who have chosen Buddhism or Christianity. Either being converted by Christians or viewing Buddhism as a more traditionally Mongolian religion. Another group, who consider themselves “modern” or “true” atheists, view all religion as backwards and blame religion for holding Mongolia back from development. However, many young people have embraced Böö Mörgöl, believing it to be the true religion of Mongolia. They see it as timeless and a way to decolonize the hearts and souls of Mongolia (Enkhbayar, 2014)¹. Finally, there are the “agnostics” who believe in Tenger but don’t frequent shamans².

There are also differences between these revivals. Mongolia, for a start, is the target of extensive evangelical missionizing. Although missionaries do target Tibet, it is technically illegal in China to missionize which limits the missionizing. Likewise, in Mongolia there is Buddhist missionizing, which is widely encouraged by the authorities who invite Buddhist organizations and grant them extensive visas and even citizenship.

This is sudden influx of missionaries to fill the religious gap is quite unique in Mongolia which, after the socialist period was largely bereft of religion. Even in the most recent census, roughly 38.6% of Mongolians identify as “non-religious³.” Furthermore, Böö Mörgöl is discouraged by large portions of the local population and even the government itself. In the late 2010s, the government enacted laws stating that shamans could not perform with drums after 9 PM⁴. This law did not apply to Buddhist practices such as *chöd* (*gcod*) which also uses a loud drum and bell, as well as singing.

Conversely, in Tibet Gesar is widely accepted and encouraged not only by practitioners, but local Tibetans and numerous levels of the government. Finally, while many aspects of Gesar practice are involuntary, far more are voluntary. One chooses to partake in the religious or cultural practices. To become a shaman, however, is considered purely involuntary with the spirits choosing for you.

Conclusion

Post colonial societies, and minority societies that have been forced to accept the majority ethnic narrative are more justified in being xenophobic and rejecting foreign ideas. Both Tibet and Mongolia experienced extreme periods of cultural purging. During these times, some of the most basic aspects of culture were criminalized. In both cases, in a relatively short period, numerous aspects of culture were destroyed, and in some cases, the threads connecting new generations to the past were destroyed along with them. Indigenous practices, such as the practices of Gesar and Böö Mörgöl provide a potential path to rebuild a connection to the past, and re-form a Tibetan or Mongolian identity.

For both Tibetans and Mongolians, these practices can repair forced-forgetting of the socialist period and cultural revolution respectively. Through the sacred remembering of a practitioner in trance, the young, unmoored generation can rebuild bridges through the past, whether it be through remembering, or re-imagining history. The seemingly miraculous powers, against the conscious will of the practitioner, in the eyes of believers is immutable proof of the truth of their culture, a justification of their identity, the strength of their people and their land, and absolute proof of the divine strength of their people. Finally, through these connections, newly forged through old traditions, the young Mongolian man can know his lineage, despite being of one of the men “without fathers⁵”, and a young Tibetan can trace their lineage to the generals of a sacred king. Young believers can anchor their modernity in the unbroken foundation of the past.

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¹ Enkhbayar, Basansuren. Personal interview. June-July 2012.

² Shagdarjav, Ganbat. Personal interview. 29 June 2013.

³ 2010 Population and Housing Census of Mongolia. Data recorded in Brian J. Grim et al. *Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2014*. BRILL, 2014. p. 152.

⁴ Batmunkh, Amargerel. Personal Interview, Mongolia. August, 2019.

⁵ A term I heard by many of the sons of migrants from the countryside who now lived in Ulaanbaatar and felt deeply unmoored.

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