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Christopher P. Atwood

University of Pennsylvania, catwood@sas.upenn.edu

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At the time of publication, author Christopher P. Atwood was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently, he is a faculty member in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Comments

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Anyone who reads the fairly extensive literature on Mongolian religion at the popular or lay level will notice the persistence of certain verbal formulas used to explain the relations of Buddhism to what is called shamanism. Essentially every ritual text or practice that is either concerned with practical ends or untraceable to a Tibetan source is treated as shamanist.¹ At the same time, these texts and practices are said to have been contaminated or camouflaged with “Lamaist” formulas. No matter how numerous or seemingly crucial to the meaning and intent of the ritual these formulas are, however, they can never serve to obscure the essentially shamanist nature of the text. In this view, while a superficial observer might think that shamanism had virtually disappeared in most of Mongolia by the eighteenth century, it actually lived a vigorous underground life among the common folk of Mongolia, whose nomadic needs could not be satisfied by the purely otherworldly religion of the Buddha.

Given the pervasiveness of these formulas in the literature on Mongolian religion, a rejection of their applicability would imply a thorough rethinking of the field as a whole. Yet the Lamaist verbal formulas

I would like to thank Robert Campany, Michael Walter, and Johan Elverskog for the thorough and helpful readings they gave of earlier drafts of this article and for their encouragement in pursuing this article to publication.

¹ Thus, the major Western-language bibliography of Mongolian studies, Henry G. Schwarz, *Bibliotheca Mongolica*, pt. 1, *Works in English, French, and German* (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1978), pp. 118–30, gives a bibliography of this topic divided into sections entitled “Native Religious Practices” and “Buddhism,” according to criteria that are not always clear.

touched on above build on a distinct paradigm in the study of religion that achieved dominance in nineteenth-century scholarship but has since demonstrated its sharp limitations. Built into the foundations of the study of Mongolian lay religious practices by the pioneering nineteenth-century Buriat scholar, Dorzhi Banzarov, this paradigm has continued largely unchallenged until the present. An awareness of this dependence reveals the degree to which the study of Mongolian religious practice has relied upon highly dubious first principles. Illustrating this claim, a rereading of the fire-text prayers that formed one of the original sites for a Lamaist scholarship of Mongolian religious practices will demonstrate how a fuller understanding of the Buddhist tradition as a whole opens the possibility of transcending a simplistic identity of nomadism with an unchanging shamanism. Finally, this new reading of the fire-text prayers also helps to reevaluate the work of Mergen Diyanchi, the third Mergen Gegen, one of the most prominent ritualist creators in Mongolian Buddhism, and demonstrates how the newer, more pluralist reading of the Buddhist tradition yields a more satisfying picture of his work.

I. DORZHI BANZAROV AND THE TWO-TIER MODEL OF MONGOLIAN RELIGION

This schema of the study of shamanism was largely established by Dorzhi Banzarov (1822–55), whose work is still seen as the classic source today. He portrayed shamanism as a natural outgrowth of the nomadic way of life, a concept to which he assigned great explanatory power. To him, shamanism could be explained as an independent growth formed out of the contact of a childlike people, the Mongols, with natural forces they could not fully understand. Thus, like his younger German contemporaries, Wilhelm Schwartz and Friedrich Max Müller, Banzarov posited that the earliest level of religion existed as a direct and virtually precultural response to nature.² In this sense shamanism was not so much a particular religious tradition with a particular formation in time and space, but more a universal stage of religion that any nomadic people must adopt naturally: “If it is compared with the mythological systems of the ancient peoples of Asia and Europe, then . . . there is a remarkable resemblance between the black faith [Mongolian shamanism] and the others, but the resemblance is chance or better, a

² Jan de Vries, *Perspectives in the History of Religions*, trans. Kees W. Bolle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 80–90. Banzarov's work preceded these influential nineteenth-century German theorists and has to be seen as a case of intellectual parallelism within a similar *Zeitgeist*, rather than as a case of direct influence. Eventually, the roots of such thinking go back to the classical speculations of Theagenes, Prodicus, and Epicurus—see de Vries, pp. 5–9, 11. I would like to thank Robert Campany for pointing out these influences.

natural one, not dependent on the nearness of peoples.”³ In line with a topos as old as Herodotus, Banzarov saw no reason to dispute that nomadism involved an unavoidable coarseness and austerity, accentuated by the chaos that prevails in the nomadic condition owing to the absence of a state.⁴ In fact, though, he applied this general assumption about nomadic religion rather inconsistently, claiming that the Mongolian cult of the fire was influenced strongly by Mazdaism and that the religions of China and Mongolia were largely identical, even though the former was anything but nomadic.⁵

At times Banzarov makes it very difficult to understand exactly to what period of shamanism he is referring. His privileging of the past over the present, of genesis over development, is so pervasive and unconscious that “the Mongols” seem to refer far more to the denizens of the thirteenth-century empire than to any of his contemporaries. As Johannes Fabian has pointed out, “allochronism,” or the assigning of the anthropological other to a time past relative to the ethnographer, has been a critical strategy in turning contemporary cultures into fit objects of anthropological study.⁶ Thus, in describing the various customs of purification by fire Banzarov concludes by merely noting that “many of these customs have up until now been maintained among the Mongolian people” but does not tell us exactly which ones. Or, in discussing a text of the ritual of fire he writes that “there is such a mixture in it of old and new, of shamanist and Buddhist, that it is difficult to derive from it an understanding of the ancient ritual of sacrificial offering to fire.”⁷ He shows no interest in what the ritual *is*, as it is revealed in the actual texts and practices, only in it as a possible mirror to the origins of the custom, thus leading him to turn away from the abundant evidence of his own time toward the obscure traces of ancient beliefs.

In this approach Banzarov was by no means alone; nineteenth-century social science saw as its primary task the elucidation of social evolution through the analysis of cultural and social complexes and the assignment

³ Dorji Banzarov, “The Black Faith or Shamanism among the Mongols,” trans. Jan Nattier and John P. Kruger, *Mongolian Studies* 7 (1981–82): 57. There is a large literature on Banzarov in Russian. For an introduction to the state of the field, see V. Ts. Naidakov et al., eds., *Tezisy i doklady nauchnoi konferentsii “Banzarovskie chteniia” posviashchennoi 170-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Dorzhi Banzarova* (Ulan-Ude: Buriat Institute of Social Science, 1992). See also Naidakov’s short biography of Banzarov, “Banzhaluofu xiaozhuan,” translated from Russian into Chinese in *Menggu shi yanjiu cankao ziliao* 17 (1965): 46–52.

⁴ Banzarov, pp. 56–57, 64, 74, 80, 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 70–73, 75.

⁶ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). I would like to thank Robert Campany for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁷ Banzarov, p. 72.

of individual units to various historical stages. Within this approach, “survivals,” or features that were seen as meaningful only when put into a new context as holdovers from some hypothesized earlier stage of social evolution, played a crucial role. Authors working within the methodology of survivals “pursue a sort of quest for origins, assuming that to explain the ‘why’ of a contemporary practice is to trace it to its beginnings.”⁸

In view of this theoretical framework—an unchanging nomadic personality and a conviction that genesis defines identity—we can see how Banzarov tends to view all religious change as corruption. The Mongols “considerably distorted” fire worship when they borrowed it from the Mazdeans of Iran, as well “distorting” the original pure ancestor worship into *onggod* (felt dolls inhabited by the spirit of dead ancestors) worship.⁹ At the same time, though, he saw the victorious march of the three faiths, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, as a victory for civilization. However, shamanism “is not disappearing rapidly, being defended by austere nature [under whose dominion, remember, the nomads peculiarly are] from the enterprising nature of educated peoples.” Given the constant personality of the nomadic peoples, though, Banzarov claims that the Buddhist missionary approach, which consists not of eliminating but of assimilating shamanist practices and replacing the old rituals with new ones of the same function, has been far more successful than that of the other two religions.¹⁰

At the same time, though, he intimates that some fundamental change has occurred in the nature of religion. He claims that “under the gentle rules of Buddhism the people could easily forget the shamans”¹¹ and that apart from their condescending attitude toward shamanism, the Buddhists also derived strength from their superiority in morality and intellect. Thus he seems to vacillate between an environmental determinism, in which nomads have an inherent attitude toward nature that cannot change, and a more idealist view, in which doctrine determines personality and in which the introduction of a new religion can change a people at a stroke. While the former derives its force from a self-consciously sedentary perspective of Mongolian religion, the latter is consistent with the attitude of the Buddhist clergy and missionaries as they expanded north. (The exact approach of Buddhist clerics to shamanist practices will be elucidated later.) Much of the development of modern scholarship on Mongolian shamanism seems to involve a decision for the first alternative at the expense of the second.

⁸ Robert Campany, “‘Survival’ as an Interpretive Strategy: A Sino-Western Case Study,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 2 (1990): 2–26.

⁹ Banzarov, pp. 71, 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

During the twentieth century, dramatic changes in the position of Buddhism in Mongolia itself strengthened the dominance of “nomadism” and persistent “shamanism” as explanatory categories in the study of Mongolian religion. When Banzarov was writing, the ascendant position of Buddhism in Mongolia (if not in all of Buriatia) was unquestioned. But in the course of the twentieth century, anticlericalism, developing into outright anti-Buddhism, gradually began to offer a powerful alternative to Buddhism. From 1920 to 1949, the Buddhist establishment formed the institutional core of many rebellions against the revolutionary regimes in Buriatia, Mongolia proper (the former Mongolian People’s Republic), and Inner Mongolia. In response, the secular and anticlerical scholarly communities in these native Mongol areas developed a body of scholarship that deliberately minimized the role of Buddhism and sought in the unsullied spirit of the folk a tradition antipathetic to the feudal Buddhist church. To the extent that religion was treated at all, the role and practices of religious professionals, whether Buddhist monks or ecstatic shamans, were treated as marginal and exploitative. More lay-oriented practices such as the *oboo* (cairn) ceremonies or the fire cult, however, were often presented as a picturesque part of some unchanging nomadic ritual life devoid of any partisan religious connotation.

In this model of the study of shamanism, we can see the pervasive influence of the two-tier model of religious life prevalent in Western scholarship since the Enlightenment. Despite being himself a Mongol, Banzarov wrote his work as a dissertation at the University of Kazan⁷ and had clearly been profoundly influenced by Humboldt and other Western scholars. Thus, Western models have played a decisive role from the beginning of modern Mongolian studies. In this two-tier model, which, as has been discussed by Peter Brown, found its decisive modern formulation at the hands of David Hume (though of course it is much older), religion as a category essentially disappears, being dissolved on the one hand into philosophy and on the other into superstition.¹² The religious life of the intellectual elite centers on conceptual and abstract (often designated as “pure”) thought about a noncorporeal deity, while the lower classes, more materialist and primitive in their thinking, cannot raise their thoughts above the material plane and hence see religion as the demanding of physical benefits from physical gods. Thus, the story of religion consists on the one hand of a history of philosophic doctrines held by the elites and on the other hand of the drearily predictable idol worship of the masses.

¹² Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. pp. 13–22.

In common with most thinkers of the Enlightenment, Hume felt that however laughable and absurd from an intellectual standpoint this grossly physical worship of the masses was, there was no hope that they would ever outgrow it. Through space and time, the philosophical nature of the elite and the superstitious nature of the populace persisted, despite all efforts at education of the latter on the part of the former. The only role for the historian lies in tracing the shifting balance of philosophy and superstition; in some eras, where security and prosperity have increased the dominance of the elite, superstition will, if not disappear, at least be held in check and make little appearance in the written records. In other, violent and chaotic, periods, the prevailing insecurity will result in making the distant comforts of philosophy seem cold and impotent; at that time superstition will not only rule the mind of the masses but also make inroads among the educated classes.

The appeal and the danger of this model lies in its simplicity. It deliberately asserts that many, indeed most, of the actual religious phenomena are incapable of being rationally explained; they must simply be written off as superstition. It also rather obviously posits the skeptical and rationalist scholar as the summum bonum of all intellectual history, a factor that has undoubtedly contributed to this model's almost two-century-long reign in academia. It is also readily adaptable to more radical ideologies; by adding the caveat that religion functions in this fashion only up until the establishment of, for example, socialism, and that in class society the philosophers of the elite actually promote superstition among the people to further confuse and demoralize the restless masses, it becomes the basic formula of the Marxist-Leninist scholarship on religion hitherto dominant in the USSR, Mongolia, and China.

Peter Brown has shown by demonstration, however, that applying this model to the late Roman religion, which has been conventionally treated as one in which the tide of popular superstition overwhelmed the philosophy of late antiquity, simply does not make convincing sense of the phenomena of the period. As he notes, the two-tier model serves as a "labor saving formula"¹³ that is intended not so much to furnish an explanation of what the church fathers had in mind when they encouraged the cult of the saints as to provide a justification for not studying in detail a phenomenon that religious scholars have found uncomfortable and even offensive.

Along similar lines, the standard scholarly preface to any article on Mongolian ritual will discuss the text in terms of a veneer of Lamaism covering the truly shamanistic nature. Apparently no detailed analysis of the ritual in terms of what it meant to the participants or to the ritualists

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

who composed it is necessary. Indeed, it seems that if we grant that the Lamaist (read “bad, corrupt Buddhist”) elements are simply contaminants and hence unworthy of analysis, there is little left for the scholar to do. C. R. Bawden writes apropos a list of attributes of the god Manakhan Tngri, “This list is considerably influenced by Buddhism and it is possible that the list in Rinchen’s text too . . . is similarly contaminated, and that hence not too much notice should be taken of it.”¹⁴ When the same author tells us that one “shamanistic” ritual has adopted its “whole pattern and substance” from Buddhism or that in others the “vener” of Lamaism includes the rituals’ very “ideas and concepts, and above all formulas,”¹⁵ we can only wonder where the shamanist essence of these rituals can be hiding if it is not apparent in their ideas, concepts, or formulas.

Although it is seldom, if ever, explicitly stated, the writers on shamanism in fact assume that the defining mark of a shamanistic ritual is its intent. That is, they assume that Buddhist rituals are, by definition, concerned only with nirvana, the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path, and so forth. Thus, a ritual with a practical function, for example, to ward off disease or jealous spirits, is ipso facto not Buddhist but rather shamanistic.¹⁶ Such writers view Buddhism as an exclusively otherworldly religion that had to compromise with the shamanists of Tibet and Mongolia, who, as nomads, had concerns that were simply too primitive to be accommodated by real Buddhism. Hence the propagators of religion in Tibet and Mongolia had to manufacture a kind of “margarine Buddhism” (to borrow a phrase from Stalin), that is, Lamaism, that paid much attention to worldly affairs.

Comparative perspectives from the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, an area where anthropological research has focused on the relation of the literate Great Tradition and the peasant Little Tradition, though, suggest the limitations and, on many points, the outright falsity of this view. As Stanley Tambiah, on the basis of his fieldwork in northeast Thailand, notes about this bifurcating mode of investigation: “Insufficient regard was paid to the fact that the great literary religious

¹⁴ Charles R. Bawden, “Mongols Notes. II. Some ‘Shamanistic’ Hunting Rituals from Mongolia,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 12 (1968–69): 110. See also John Gombojab Hangin, “Mongolian Folklore: A Representative Collection from the Oral Literary Tradition,” *Mongolian Studies: Journal of the Mongolia Society* 10 (1986–87): 151–54, where he deigns to translate only those invocations “uncontaminated” by Buddhism.

¹⁵ Charles R. Bawden, “Mongol Notes. I. The Louvain Fire Ritual,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 8 (1963): 284, and “Mongol Notes, II” p. 104.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Walther Heissig, “A Source to the Lamaist Suppression of Shamanism,” *Anthropos* 48 (1953): 506–7; and Alice Sarközi, “A Text of the Popular Religious Belief ‘Cutting off the Lasso,’” *Acta Orientalia* 38 (1984): 39–40.

tradition is itself varied and has been both cumulative and changing; secondly, it has for some curious reason not been seen that contemporary lived religion, even that observable in the village, incorporates a great deal of the literary tradition. *Brahman* priests, Buddhist monks, ritual experts and scribes in some measure with literary and oral knowledge transmitted to their successors. And for the common people at large such texts and knowledge have a referential and legitimating function, even if they themselves have no direct access to them.”¹⁷ *Mutatis mutandis* (e.g., there are no Brahmins in Mongolia) the same could be said both about Mongolian religion itself and about the situation of its study. As we have seen, though, Mongolists *have* noted the Buddhist elements in popular Mongolian religious practice, but, unfortunately, they have also used the language of contamination to inoculate themselves against taking it seriously.

Examining the canonical tradition of texts transmitted from India to Burma, Melford Spiro has noted that although the three aims of Buddhism, the nirvanic aim (i.e., liberation from rebirth), the karmic aim (the enjoyment of the good life through accumulation of merit), and the apotropaic aim (the warding off of evil in the immediate present through spells, worship, etc.), may seem contradictory when analyzed abstractly and can rarely be satisfactorily reconciled even by Burmese believers themselves, they are all well attested in the Pali canon.¹⁸ The contradiction, if there is one, is a contradiction *within* the Buddhist tradition of practice as it came to Burma, not a contradiction generated by the “pure faith of the Bhikkus” being corrupted by the superstitious, *nat*-worshipping, Burmese peasants. Thus the Pali canon contains a spell that was composed by the Buddha to defend against snakebite and that is still used for this purpose today in Burma. These texts, of which there are many, are called *paritta* in Pali and are learned by both monks and lay folk. The former recite them in Pali, the latter either in Pali or in Burmese translations.¹⁹ The contradiction of the doctrine of cumulative karmic retribution with the belief in the immediate efficacy of apotropaic rituals was also among the questions put to the sage Nagasena by King Milinda in *The Questions of King Milinda*.²⁰

In Mongolia, as well, an examination of even monastic Buddhist literature suggests that the characterization of the religion as inherently

¹⁷ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 3–4.

¹⁸ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 144–47, 258–73.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 265–66.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

otherworldly is false. Dharmatāla, the Inner Mongolian author of a Tibetan language history of Buddhism in Mongolia, quotes the Fifth Dalai Lama as writing in an epistle to the Mongols, “The Precious Teaching of the Buddha, which comprises things of countless merit to the gods and sentient beings, is the root of all prosperity. Therefore it is bound to spread and prosper.”²¹ Ishidandzanwangjil, an incarnate lama of Ordos, penned a ten-chapter work in the didactic genre of the sermon in verse (*surgal shilüg*), of which seven chapters concern secular matters such as the importance of formal education in the moral development of children, the proper regulation of family life, the evils of drink, and so on.²² The following three stanzas of a didactic poem of Kheshigbatu (1849–1916), written in an unmistakably Buddhist mode, are typical in mixing apotropaic and nirvanic elements quite comfortably into its primarily karmic focus:

Pacify hell and prētas with the power of the Dharma’s *dhāraṇā*!
 Pacify the beasts by a pleasure in tending them!
 Pacify all men with patient zeal!
 May all the six regions be happy!

As the laws of the lord khaan and the state will sharpen,
 May all in this great world be quiet and tranquil.
 As the multitude of different creatures have seed and multiply,
 So will the many people rejoice in peace and tranquility.

May the religion our teacher Buddha’s dharma last forever!
 Let the soles of the great blessed lamas be firmly planted!
 With a thought of enlightenment nascent in our slave’s hearts
 Let us never walk in evil views or evil doctrine!²³

Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century there was a vigorous movement on the part of the Buddhist clergy to reform the evil ways of the populace.²⁴ Everywhere in Mongolian Buddhist moral literature the believer is enjoined to act with a view to happiness “in this and the next

²¹ Damchø Gyatsho Dharmatāla, *Rosary of White Lotuses, Being the Clear Account of How the Precious Teaching of Buddha Appeared and Spread in the Great Hor Country*, trans. Piotr Klafkowski (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987), p. 241.

²² Sainjirgal and Sharaldai, eds., *Ishidandzanwangjil-un silüg-üd* (Beijing: Nationalities, 1984).

²³ Henry Serruys, “Two Didactic Poems from Ordos,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 6 (1972): 452 (text in transcription), 481–82 (text in facsimile), 460 (translation). My translation here differs somewhat from that of Serruys’s. Prētas are hungry ghosts, beings intermediate between animals and hell beings in the Buddhist wheel of karma.

²⁴ Charles R. Bawden, “On the Evils of Strong Drink: A Mongol Tract from the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Tractata Altaica*, ed. Walther Heissig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), pp. 61, 63.

life" (*ene ba khoitu nasu*). Certainly the way of morality was thought to be beneficial in the here and now, as well as in the future life, and the concern of the clergy extended to the present material prosperity of the laypeople in all its manifold components as well as to their rebirth.

Peculiarly Buddhist apotropaic rituals, such as the reading of Buddhist texts to avert danger, were also widely practiced in Mongolia. Commonly used methods included the reading of canonical texts such as the Prajñāpāramitā, the Medicine Buddha chapter of the Lotus Sutra, and the sūtra "The One with the White Umbrella" (*Tathāgatoṣṇīśasītāpatrā-parājitamahāpratyangirāparmasiddha*), invocations of the fierce Protectors of the Dharma, and the use of ritual devices like the thread cross and flour dolls attested in the Tibetan monastic environment.²⁵ Indeed it is difficult to see the creation of many apotropaic rituals as having anything whatsoever to do with illiterate, or even lay, people; many rituals were translated from Tibetan (and occasionally Chinese) and were sometimes almost incomprehensible without reference to the original language version, and they often contained no reference to any facet of distinctively Mongolian culture.²⁶ Thus the works seem to derive from the stratum of the multilingual clergy that displayed a great interest in any sort of apotropaic or divinatory ritual and collected examples of such rituals often without any regard to their present immediate utility. We will return to the significance of this feature of the Mongolian clergy below.

This review of the firm place of apotropaic ritual in canonical Buddhism suggests that the two-tier model of Mongolian religion has long outlived whatever usefulness it had. It has drawn much of its strength from the caricature of Buddhism found in the works of nineteenth-century Western writers enamored of their own vision of a pure, spiritual, ritualless, and completely self-consistent philosophy-religion, which itself was an apotheosis of the only kind of religion Hume felt was appropriate for the learned.²⁷ That model then called into existence, as a sort of Mr. Hyde to its Dr. Jekyll, the image of the magical, superstitious, and degraded Lamaism appropriate for the nomadic, and hence irreducibly

²⁵ Sárközi, "A Text of the Popular Religious Belief," pp. 42–44; Charles R. Bawden, "On the Practice of Scapulimancy among the Mongols," *Central Asiatic Journal* 4 (1958): 11–31, and "The Supernatural Element in Sickness and in Death According to the Mongol Tradition," pts. 1, 2, *Asia Major* 8 (1961): 233–34, 256; 9 (1962): 162, 165–66, 170–71. On protective rituals in Tibet, see esp. Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 227–359.

²⁶ Alice Sárközi, "A Mongolian Manual of Divination by Means of Characteristics of the Land," in *Tractata Altaica*, ed. Walther Heissig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976), pp. 584–86; Bawden, "The Supernatural Element in Sickness and in Death," pt. 1, p. 216.

²⁷ See Spiro, p. 143; Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 202–40.

ignorant, herdsmen. This myth of original Buddhism has long since been exploded, but unfortunately the image it implicitly spawned of Inner Asian Buddhism as the bastard birth of pure Buddhism with a nomadic-shamanist culture inherently incapable of understanding it lingers on.²⁸

The published ritual texts from Mongolia, however, permit us to go far beyond such naïve criticism, as well as demonstrating a more sophisticated view of the borders of Buddhism and shamanism in Mongolian society. If we give a close reading to some of these ritual texts, it can be seen that formulas of a thin veneer of Lamaism distorting the shamanist essence severely impede our ability to understand what actually is going on in these texts both individually and as a whole.

The texts with which we will be dealing and the rituals they describe come from the areas of Mongolia where Buddhism had long since been the dominant religion. While shamans still openly challenge Buddhist hegemony among the Buriats, the Darkhad Mongols in Khöwsgöl, and the Bargus and East Mongols of Inner Mongolia, elsewhere they are few and far between. V. Diószegi, a Hungarian ethnographer, despite the cooperation of the local government, was unable to find any shamans at all during a field trip in eastern Khalkha,²⁹ while during an admittedly brief stay in Shili-yin Gool, I was unable to find even one person who could say he or she had met a shaman. Thus, throughout the largest part of Mongolia, shamanism, if it exists, is practiced by a minuscule number of furtive shamans and shamanesses. Since, however, it is assumed that nomadism decisively directs the religious proclivities of the Mongols in a shamanistic direction, shamanism *must* be detectable somewhere within the ritual life even of Mongols without any connection to ecstatic shamanist activity. As a result, ceremonies that are widely practiced in these areas, notably the cairn (*oboo*) sacrifice and the fire cult, have been generally interpreted as shamanist survivals covered by only a veneer of Buddhism.³⁰ This reinterpretation has come about despite the fact that these rituals are never performed by shamans and, in the case of the *oboo* ceremony, usually must be officiated over by a lama (the fire sacrifice is performed at home either by the householder or by a lama

²⁸ Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 3–16, 27–32, 51–59, gives a probing critique of similar tropes about the supposedly inevitably “nominal” character of Islam in Inner Asia. His criticism of existing approaches for the study of Islamic religion in Inner Asia is strikingly parallel to that suggested here for Buddhism among the Mongols.

²⁹ V. Diószegi, “Problems of Mongolian Shamanism,” *Acta Ethnographica* 10 (1961): 195.

³⁰ See Bayartu, *Alashan-u jang agali* (Khökhekhota: Inner Mongolia People’s Publishing House, 1989), whose chapter titled “Remnants of Shamanism” treats just these two practices.

specially invited for the occasion). Strikingly, there is no indication in Buddhist antishamanic polemics that anything other than what Bawden calls ecstatic shamanism, that is, the dance and spiritual journey aided by the spirits of the dead shamans held in the *onggod*, was ever disapproved of, or attacked, or even designated as non-Buddhist by the Buddhist clergy.³¹

Let it be clear what I am saying and what I am not saying. Shamans (*böö*) and shamanesses (*idugan*) and their ecstatic ritual have an attested existence since the earliest known history of the Mongols. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were indeed suppressed in most of Mongolia by Buddhist missionaries. They can still be found fairly commonly in Buriatia, Khölön Buir, and Khöwsgöl, less commonly among the Oirads of Khowd and the East Mongols of the old Jirim League, and rarely elsewhere. Many rituals that are practiced as Buddhist ones now probably do have some precursors in the pre-Buddhist days, and hence some reorientation of these rituals from a shamanist context to a Buddhist one may well have occurred. This I do not dispute. What I do dispute is the view that nomadism as such has any determining influence on the Mongols' ability or interest in understanding a world religion. Hence I also dispute the consequent assumption that all popular Mongolian religious activity can be assumed to be essentially shamanistic, regardless of "external" appearances. I dispute that rituals practiced widely by the Buddhist Mongols, notably the *oboo* and fire rituals, can in any meaningful sense be called shamanist, at least as attested since the earliest texts from the eighteenth century. I also dispute the utility and correctness both of terming any ritual with a practical purpose shamanism and of dividing what is after all an integral ritual into a shamanist core and a Buddhist veneer. And finally I dispute that the involvement of the Buddhist clergy in such rituals is necessarily a reluctant concession to popular beliefs.

II. MONGOLIAN FIRE RITUALS: A REREADING OF THE CULTIC TEXTS

In the literature from Banzarov on, the fire ritual plays the role as one of the classic examples of a shamanic ritual taken over but not changed by Buddhism. Yet the actual documentation of its alleged shamanist origins is remarkably thin. Thirteenth-century travelers such as John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck mention that all those admitted

³¹ See the accounts of proselytization below and the description of shamanism by a Buriat historian in A. Pozdneyev, *Mongol'skaia khrestomatiia pervonachal'nago prepodavaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1900), pp. 293–311, trans. in Jorma Partanen, "A Description of Buriat Shamanism," *Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seuran Aikakauskirja/Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 51 (1941–42): 1–34.

for an audience with the Kha'ans had to undergo a purification by fire. Attendant on these purifications were certain priests who supervised the rituals.³² But we have no attested evidence for the nature or even existence of the actual household sacrifice before the eighteenth century; we cannot assume that the use of fire as a vehicle of purification necessarily implied any particular form of domestic worship.³³

When we do see the actual fire ritual in Mongolia, it is fully integrated into the Buddhist pantheon. The extant ritual texts do speak of the fire being born when Eternal Heaven and Ötükhen, Mongolian personifications of earth, had not separated, but they actually begin by apostrophizing her as created by the god Khormusta³⁴ and Buddha or as generated from the Sanskrit syllable *ram*. More than twenty separate fire rituals have been published, but there is not one that does not thus explicitly align the cult of fire with the Great Tradition of Buddhism. Yet this is hardly to say that they are uniform. Although few of the published ritual texts are identical, they fall into three clear groups. The members of the first group, composing the bulk of the known texts, all contain certain set phrases, such as “born of the flint stone mother, and the blue steel father” and “I drip fatty oil to you.” Within this group three other subtypes, apparently regional in distribution, can be identified. Thus, one subtype seems to derive mostly from Cakhar,³⁵ to which the second

³² A Nun of Stanbrook Abbey, trans., *Mongol Mission*, ed. Christopher Dawson (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955), pp. 10–12, 14, 56, 198–99.

³³ Such purifications by fire are still practiced in East Mongolia, although not so publicly as before; clothes intended for a lama, e.g., must be so treated. See Kürelbagatur and Urancimeg, *Qorcin-u jang agali* (Khökhekhota: Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 1988), pp. 248–49.

³⁴ In Mongolian translations of Buddhist scriptures, “Khormusta” renders the Indian god Indra. The name “Khormusta” itself, however, stemmed from the Sogdian rendition (*xrmzšt'*) of the supreme Mazdean deity, Ahura Mazda, which was transmitted to the Uygur Manicheans as *χurmazta*. Among the Uygur Buddhists this “Khurmazta” was then identified with Indra. See Alois van Tongerloo, “Middle Iranian in Old Uygur: Remarks on Selected Specimens in the Buddhist and Manichean Texts,” in *Medioiranica: Proceedings of the International Colloquium organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 21st to the 23rd of May 1990*, ed. Wojciech Skalmowski and Alois van Tongerloo (Leuven: Peeters en Departement Orientalistik, 1993), pp. 177–78; and more speculatively, Helmut Humbach, “Vahu, Siva und der Spiritus Vivens im ostiranischen Synkretismus,” *Acta Iranica* 4 (1975): 401. The name and the identification with Indra was then carried over to the Mongols already in the fourteenth century. See Shōgaito Masahiro, “On Uighur Elements in Buddhist Mongolian Texts,” *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 49 (1991): 37; and Walther Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 49–50. I would like to thank Aleksandr Naymark for his efforts at locating these references for me.

³⁵ Antoine Mostaert, “A propos d'une prière au feu,” in *American Studies in Altaic Linguistics*, ed. Nicholas Poppe (Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, 1962), pp. 191–223; Walther Heissig, *Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1966), nos. 4–7, 9, 10.

subtype, exemplified by Ordos³⁶ and Oirad texts,³⁷ is similar but with some distinctive variations. The two texts in Damdinsürüng's anthology, presumably from Khalkha Mongolia, are similar to each other and form a third subtype, diverging somewhat more from the Chakhar and Ordos-Oirad ones.³⁸

The form of these rituals is irregularly head rhyming or alliterative and neither isosyllabic nor strophic, but tending toward couplets, a poetic form characteristic of other forms of Mongolian oral poetry. The texts of these rituals, despite the occasional mention of the Sanskrit syllable *ram*, make no integral use of tantric ritual methods; that is, they do not involve a meditation through which the conventional world is dissolved into emptiness and the deity or Buddha to be worshiped is created in visualization out of a Sanskrit mantra syllable. Here, the fire goddess is dealt with essentially as a deity existing on the plane of conventional truth. She is addressed, told of the offerings being made, and asked to extend her protection over the whole house and family of the worshiper and over the whole state. The Chakhar and Ordos-Oirad texts of this type close with a separate invocation, where the grace of the Buddhas, the Indian gods, the transcendental wisdom coming from the West (i.e., Tibet), and so forth, are invited to come with cries of *khurui, khurui*. The Khalkha texts do not have such an invocation (but they may have been written separately) and differ in giving the goddess a Sanskrit-sounding name, Mirāja Khan, in addition to her usual title as "Youngest Born, Khan of the Fire" (*Odkhan Galaikhan*).

In the course of this type of fire ritual, the invocation itself symbolically recreates the whole tent itself, and the family living within it, as the very cosmos itself. The fire is said to be produced by a series of pairs, one male, the other female—for instance, the male steel and the female flint, the male sky and the female earth, the upper ninety-nine divinities and the lower seventy-seven-fold earth, the father king and the mother queen. At the same time, the fire rituals claim first of all to bring forth children—sons, daughters-in-law, and daughters—as well as to

³⁶ Qu. Altan'agula, *Ordos Monggolcud-un ulamjilaltu jang agali*, ed. M. Qasbagana, Ordos-un soyol-un öb, vol. 5 ("Altan Gandari's" Special Publications in Folklore and Literature, 1989), pp. 245–52; Heissig, *Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte*, no. 8.

³⁷ Heissig, *Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte*, nos. 11–13.

³⁸ C. Damdinsürüng, *Monggol-un uran jokiyal-un degeji jagun biling* (Khökhekhota: Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 1979), 1:372–98. Öbör Monggol-un Öbertegen Jasaqu Oron-u Sinjilekü Uqagan-u Küriyeleng, *Monggol ündüsüten-ü gün uqagan ba neyigem-ün üjel sanagan-u teüke-yin matériyal-un emkidkel*, vol. 1 (Khökhekhota: Inner Mongolia Educational Publishing House, 1988), pp. 141–68. That translated in Bawden, "Mongol Notes, I" (n. 15 above), pp. 281–303, seems to be a sort of pastiche of some Khalkha and Inner Mongolian lay rituals, as well as some more tantric ones.

pacify the state and make the king and queen and their property flourish. If we identify the king and queen who produce the fire, that is, the master and mistress of the family, with the king and queen of the extradomestic world, we begin to see the system of overlapping identifications at work. The state, the cosmos, and the family are all seen as composed of dualistic, male and female pairs, generating progeny. The aim of the ritual is to identify the tent and family both with the cosmos centered on the fire and the state, and the man and woman of the house with the sovereign genitors of the realm and of the cosmos itself, and by so doing render the house and family prosperous and invulnerable to harm.

Thus, as a charter for the patriarchal family, the fire rituals situate the kindling of the fire at a time when “Mt. Meru was a hillock, when the sky above was flat and mother earth was the size of a foot’s sole,” when Khanggai above was a hillock, and the Yellow River was liquid mud, and so forth (note again the dualities, which are implicitly based on the gender duality—the Yellow River in Mongolia is termed Khatun Gool, or “Queen River”). These formulas also recall the beginning of Mongolian magic epics, which also can be best read as charters for the formation of the family and explorations of the tensions within it—these epic tales center on either the quest for the bride or the rescue of a kidnapped wife.³⁹ Further, the fire is also often stated to have been first kindled by Chinggis Khan and his queen, Börte, or Chinggis’s mother and father, or Khubilai Kha’an and his queen Chambui, and so forth. We find the same re-creation of the couple performing the rite as the reincarnation of some ancient couple in the founding of the Mongol nation in wedding speeches in Mongolia, where the groom’s party defends the action of taking away the bride from her family by stating that it is a practice initiated by Chinggis Khan.⁴⁰

By analyzing the fire ritual in this way, we can see that the point is precisely to identify the tent and the family with the dominant worldview of the time. Sectarianism, either for shamanism or Buddhism, is precisely *not* the point: to identify the house with a world in religious strife would be to re-create the family itself as a scene of strife, exactly the opposite of the aim of the ritual. Thus, this particular fire ritual is by nature not necessarily shamanist or Buddhist; the very point of its effectiveness lies in its chameleon nature, its ability to identify the house with the powers that be. In a period of Buddhist ideological hegemony, the rite must vigorously identify itself with Buddhism, not out of a desire

³⁹ See the plot summaries in Boris Ya. Vladimirtsov, “The Oirat-Mongolian Heroic Epic,” trans. John R. Krueger, *Mongolian Studies* 8 (1983–84): 44–51; and Nicholas Poppe, *Heroic Epic of the Khalkha Mongols*, trans. J. Krueger, D. Montgomery, and M. Walter (Bloomington, Ind.: Mongolia Society, 1979), pp. 106–22.

⁴⁰ Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, pp. 66–69.

of the lamas to replace originally shamanic elements, still less out of fear or a need to cover up the ritual's past shamanic associations, but in order to make the ritual effective in integrating the family harmoniously into the nation and the cosmos. This analysis thus places the Mongolian fire cult squarely within the sphere of a wide variety of Inner Asian domestic cults.⁴¹ Indeed, comparison with Islamic Inner Asia would suggest that the fire cult actually *grew* in importance after Mongolia's conversion to Buddhism, taking over much of the domestic religious role previously played by the *onggod*.

The second and third types of fire rituals, however, are considerably different, and both indeed operate from a much more integrally Buddhist viewpoint. The second type is composed of basically a single text found in numerous, more or less identical, copies. This fire prayer, the only one with a well-known author and date, was first published in a collection of Mongolian language texts suitable to fill all the needs of a Mongolian lama, composed by the Mergen Gegen Lubsangdambijalsan (1717–66).⁴² Composed throughout in head-rhyming isosyllabic quatrains, a form of Mongolian poetry that is found mostly in works by writers strongly influenced by Tibetan poesy, the work was also copied by Mongols in Cakhar and Khalkha.⁴³ The ritual is divided into four parts: the *sang* (Tibetan *bsang*), or purification by incense, which here is combined with an invitation of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods, Brahmins, and hermits. Then follows a benediction, very similar to the body of the lay texts analyzed above. Third is an invocation, also similar to the invocations found in the Chakhar and Ordos-Oirad texts. Here, however, the text closes with a fourth section, the confirmation of blessedness (*öljei orosil*).

The ritual in its linguistic and overall structural form thus conforms to that of Buddhist rituals as practiced by the clergy in Tibet and Mongolia. This ritual text also avoids the theme of the Heaven-king-steel-master of the house, and the Earth-queen-flint-mistress of the house producing the fire. The deity is still termed khan of the fire, but Mergen Gegen adds the epithet of "The Hermit God" (Arshi Tngri—*arshi* is from Sanskrit *ṛṣi*.), and the title Râja as also found in Khalkha fire prayers. Instead of the dualist schema of the lay rituals, Mergen Gegen substitutes a more monolithically male view of the creation of this fire god, one which would be more congenial to the thinking of a celibate clergy. The aim of the ritual, especially in its benediction, is still to establish the

⁴¹ See DeWeese (n. 28 above), pp. 39–50.

⁴² Galluu and Jirantai, eds., *Mergen Gegen Lubsangdambijalsan-u gbum jarlig kemeg-dekü orosiba* (Beijing: Nationalities, 1986), pp. 372–88.

⁴³ Heissig, *Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte*, no. 14; Damdinsürüng, 1:399–408.

universality of the fire cult, but here it is a kind of universality in particularity. The first strophe in the declamation reads,

Brought about from Brahma
Worshipped by ancient saints,
Fully glorious Khan of Fire,
Bejewelled hermit god!⁴⁴

In the course of the benediction, this basic strophe is repeated with various gods and Buddhist symbols and principles, such as Indra, Vishnu, Maheśvara, concord, mercy, the Three Jewels, the wise men, and the ceremony itself, all substituted for Brahma as the creator of the fire and various other classes, such as the sovereigns, the reverent people, the many subjects, the Indians, the Mongols, the Four Foreigners,⁴⁵ the Tibetans, and the Chinese, substituted for the ancient saints as worshipers of this khan of the fire. Thus, the aim is not to identify the house with the cosmos but instead to universalize fire worship as something that occurs everywhere, both in space and in time.

At the same time, the ritual is addressed throughout to the conventionally existing fire goddess and makes only passing reference to the tantric creation of the fire goddess from the mantra *ram shri jula ram*. The variety of figures from which she is said to have been brought about does show, however, some feeling for the idea of the goddess as created anew at each performance of the ritual, especially the final category in the address to the deity, "Brought about from the ritual performed." Thus, although the conception of the role of fire in the world is expressed differently, the manner by which it is made efficacious—prayer to a conventionally existing personal deity who can bestow or withhold favors—is the same as in the lay rituals analyzed above.

The third category of fire ritual is radically different from the first two: they are completely tantric rituals. Starting with a list of ingredients—"Preparation of the necessary items: The marrow shaped like a shoe from the breastbone of a sheep, four high flanks thereof, a fistful of feather-grass"⁴⁶—the rituals give a point-by-point description of how to dissolve the conventional world into emptiness and how to visualize the deity of fire out of the Sanskrit mantras, with her *uṣṇīṣa* knot of hair, white face, and other attributes typical of a Buddhist goddess. The rituals then detail how to make these thus created deities deliver the various benefits and

⁴⁴ Galluu and Jirantai, eds., pp. 376–77.

⁴⁵ A trope of the Mongolian cosmological schema, the four foreigners are often interpreted as the Koreans, the Chinese, the Tanguts (i.e., Tibetans), and the "Saracens" (*sarta'ul*, a then-obsolete word found only in such formulas, which refers to the Muslim city folk of Turkestan).

⁴⁶ Heissig, *Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte*, no. 17.

close with a confirmation of the presence of the deity in the fire and a dissolution into the mantra *om ah hūm*.⁴⁷ The deity itself has undergone a striking transformation; she is no longer one goddess but rather “The seven sisters, khans of the Fire.” One of these texts describes how anciently in India, a woman spilled milk on the fire,⁴⁸ thus angering the seven sisters who rose up and joined the other gods. Then came Padmasambhava, who subdued them and then made them take an oath to aid living beings.⁴⁹

Given the two-tier paradigm described earlier in this article, Mongolists have hitherto not been in any doubt as to how to interpret this class of fire prayers. Thus, Heissig explains this diversity of rituals as marking the growing pressure of the clergy to “lamaize” the originally shamanic fire ritual.⁵⁰ This pressure and the substitutions it engendered, he asserts, could only be effective, however, as long as the Buddhist ritual does not exceed the limits of what the people will accept. To put Heissig’s view in more abstract sociological terms, the fire ritual is a field of contention between the religious elite and the populace. The elite wish to use ritual to project an understanding of society that is a model *for* society, while those for whom the rituals are made wish to participate in a ritual which reflects a model *of* society, yet at the same time they do not wish to set themselves publicly at odds with the normative model.⁵¹ To Heissig, this third type of fire text was a normative model that was simply too far from the laymen’s shamanist conception of the fire goddess to be accepted and hence never achieved the popularity of the other, less Buddhist, rituals in the first category.

Such an analysis achieves cogency, however, only at the cost of completely ignoring the differing social placement of the rituals. We must note first of all that although Heissig claims that “all indications of Indian influences in the fire-hymns of the Mongols are late introductions of Lamaism, or phrases, names and legends adopted for camouflage at the time of the persecution of the old Mongolian religion and therefore

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, nos. 17, 18. Number 14, mostly a copy of Mergen Gegen’s prayer, adds a tantric evocation at the beginning. Compare also Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia* (n. 34 above), pp. 73–74, and the manuscript of a fire ritual from Abaga banner (Shili-yin Gool aimag) in my possession.

⁴⁸ To spill milk or water on the fire is still forbidden among the Khorcin Mongols (see Kürelbagatur and Urancimeg [n. 33 above], p. 247).

⁴⁹ Abaga banner manuscript (n. 47 above), 1v–2r. This pattern of the spirit to be worshiped “acting up” and then being subdued follows the form of some of the earliest attested apotropaic cults to be found in Indian Buddhism, that of the Nāgas—see Lowell W. Bloss, “The Buddha and the Nāga: A Study in Buddhist Folk Religion,” *History of Religions* 13 (1973): 36–53, esp. pp. 43–46.

⁵⁰ Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, pp. 73–74.

⁵¹ On rituals as an arena of power negotiations, see Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), esp. pp. 11–18.

originate from the late sixteenth century,” he lightly steps over the fact that no fire ritual without a good deal of such “late,” Buddhist, elements has ever been published and that there is no evidence that the cult of the fire was ever seen as non-Buddhist or ever suppressed by Buddhists. Narrative sources on the Buddhist suppression of native Mongolian cults never mention any target except the shamans themselves and the felt dolls, or *onggods*, which held the spirits of the shaman ancestors.⁵² Similarly, legal codes of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries strictly prohibited animal or human sacrifice at funerals, the possession of, or sacrifice to, *onggods*, the patronage of shamans, or the practice of sorcery but said nothing whatsoever about either the fire cult or the *oboo* sacrifices.⁵³ Nor is the cult of fire seen as inherently inappropriate for Buddhist practice in other traditions. Archeological remains in both India and Central Asia evidence the close integration of fire cults with Buddhist lay and monastic devotion, while the fire cult continues to play an important role in the ritual of Japanese tantra.⁵⁴ Given the absence of Buddhist hostility to the fire cult, and the contrary indication of the full integration of even the non-Tantric types of fire rituals into a Buddhist worldview, an alleged tension between shamanism and Buddhism cannot be simply posited *ex nihilo* as a universal explanation. Once again we see the extent to which, as Peter Brown noted, the reliance on “labor saving formulas” has short-circuited the analysis.

The most important thing to note about the third type of ritual discussed is that, unlike the other two, it cannot have been performed by a layman. The meditation on emptiness and the visualization are technical processes required for the ritual to have its full effect. This process of visualization holds great dangers for the uninitiated and can lead to madness, and even death, for someone who performs it without proper training.⁵⁵ Thus the ritual of evocation must have been performed by a lama, that is, a ritual specialist, while the rituals of the first type are attested as being used by lay heads of the family in worship of the fire at

⁵² Heissig, “A Source to the Lamaist Suppression of Shamanism” (n. 16 above), pp. 519–26, and *The Religions of Mongolia*, pp. 36–45; Damchø Gyatsho (n. 21 above), pp. 219, 222, 227–28, 353–55; Charles R. Bawden, *The Jebtsundamba Khutukhtus of Urga* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 5, 35.

⁵³ Sh. Bira, “Khutagtai Setsen Khun Taijiin zokhioson negen khuuliin tukhai,” *BNMAU Shinjlekh Ukhaany Akadémiin medee*, no. 3 (1970), pp. 14–19; Valentin A. Riasanovsky, *Fundamental Principles of Mongol Law* (Tianjin, 1937; reprint, Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, 1965), p. 92; Doronatiib, ed., *Oyirad cagaja* (Khökhekhota: Inner Mongolian People’s Publishing House, 1985), pp. 184–88 (secs. 109–10).

⁵⁴ Michael Saso, *Homa Rites and Mandala Meditation in Tendai Buddhism* (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1991). I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help of Aleksandr Naymark in drawing my attention to the archaeological record of fire cults in Indian and Central Asian Buddhism.

⁵⁵ Beyer (n. 25 above), pp. 54, 76.

home.⁵⁶ Hence, to see this tantric ritual as some concession to shamanist-minded laymen, when they would not have been able or allowed to perform it in any case, is simply absurd. The danger of the text reinforced the separate but related issue of authority, embedded in the most prestigious ritual specialists of Mongolia, the yogins.

This crucial difference in the social context of the two rituals, though, does explain the striking differences between the first and third types of ritual. The tantric ritual belongs to the world of a technician operating in a world of written instructions. What we see in the tantric ritual is essentially a recipe or prescription, a set of instructions that, if followed with the correct concentration, is guaranteed to produce the proper results—as Jack Goody has noted, the recipe and the prescription are both peculiarly written genres.⁵⁷ Clearly the rituals were intended to be usable, if necessary, by someone who had seen only the text. The text of the lay rituals, however, supplied only the wording of the prayer, so that the ritual actions themselves would have to have been transmitted orally. We may also note that while none of the other ritual texts (except for that of Mergen Gegen) has any indication of the author, two of the three tantric texts in Heissig's collection note the compiler in the colophon. One contains the revealing note, "As the steward (*nirba*)⁵⁸ noted the ritual more extensively, the one named Cülrim immediately wrote it down."⁵⁹ In other words, the steward of a monastery heard a particular ritual of the fire cult that seemed more extensive, and he dictated it to Cülrim. As others have noted, Mongolian clerics and laymen translated and copied an enormous number of rituals, which often seem to have been little used. These ritual specialists also collected differing versions of rituals as a way of collating all the significant variations in the various transmission lineages of reverend teachers. The tantric fire rituals apparently grew out of this milieu of ritual collectors and technicians for whom these magical powers held little awe. At the same time, it was a typical literate milieu in its individualized mediation of knowledge through the written word, as opposed to the more social mediation found in orally transmitted lay fire rituals.⁶⁰

Thus, the difference between the lay fire ritual and the tantric one has no relation to shamanism. Rather, it bears witness to the large gap *within* the Buddhist community, between the differing abilities to handle ritual. While Buddhist ritual theory clearly admitted the effectiveness of the

⁵⁶ Altan'agula (n. 36 above), p. 244.

⁵⁷ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 129–45.

⁵⁸ A monastic office (Tibetan *snyer-pa*).

⁵⁹ Heissig, *Mongolische volksreligiöse und folkloristische Texte* (n. 35 above), no. 18.

⁶⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 31–77.

simple address to the Bodhisattva or of *dhâraṇīs* spoken without physic preparation,⁶¹ the tantric ritualists had evolved a far more powerful, if rather risky, means of evoking the protection of the Buddhist powers. At the same time though, the lay texts also generally explicitly acknowledged the role of creation through tantric evocation by referring to the fire goddess as created from the syllable *ram*. Although the householders themselves could not perform this process of evocation, once she was evoked they could address her and ask for her protection. Such references then pay tribute to the power of the yogin at the same time as they opt for the safer, if less effective, path of personal address, rather than Tantric evocation.

Thus, we can see the enormous gap that separated shamanic magic and healing from Tantric rituals that could be performed for the same purpose, even though Heissig has tried to identify the latter as simply a more systematized development of the former.⁶² The tantric ritualists were as a rule highly literate practitioners of an art that was contained in a vast body of written literature. Although crucial parts of these texts, some longer and some shorter, had to be performed verbatim from memory with the proper hand gestures (*mudrâ*) as well as the correct Sanskrit formulas (*mantra*), this did not alter the fundamentally written literate nature of tantric rituals. The whole mentality of tantric practice accordingly differed tremendously from the improvisatory oral imagination of the ecstatic shamans. This difference was recognized by the shamans themselves, who opposed their "scriptureless faith" to the written doctrines of the Buddhist clergy.⁶³ Moreover, the major and highest power of the tantra is not to propel such minor apotropaic cults like the worship of the fire but to generate Buddhahood, even in this life. The simplifications of the two-tier model are starkly revealed in this assimilation of two forms of religion that have so little in common, except a vaguely "superstitious" air to them.

This contrast between tantric rituals that involve meditation on emptiness, and then visualization of the deity, and the personal address to a deity on the conventional plane can also be seen in other rituals as well. Bawden has collected and translated several texts designed to improve the effectiveness of hunting. Several of them are addressed to Manakhan Tngri, the Mongolian Lord of Beasts, asking him to deign to allow some of his uncatchable game to be attached to the saddle thongs to which

⁶¹ See, e.g., Leon Hurvitz, *The Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Law* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 310–24.

⁶² Heissig, "A Source to the Lamaist Suppression of Shamanism" (n. 16 above), pp. 512–19, and *The Religions of Mongolia* (n. 34 above), pp. 39–43.

⁶³ Hangin (n. 14 above), p. 154; Heissig, "A Source to the Lamaist Suppression of Shamanism," p. 512.

Mongolian hunters tie their game, while other prayers are addressed to the saddle thongs themselves. Like the fire rituals, these prayers also ask for the aid of Buddhist figures like Padmasambhava, along with the god being addressed.

Strikingly different are *dhâraṇîs* for a gun that will not fire straight. Here again we see the greater, recipe-like detail of the tantric ritual text, which suggests the ritual itself may have been transmitted purely by the written text as much as or more than it was orally. The gun is dissolved, and then its various parts are recreated in the image of the bodies of the fierce deities. Thus,

Its body like the body of the lion.
 Its voice like the voice of the dragon.
 Its powder like the holy water of Mañjuśrî.
 Its shot like the stars of the holy firmament.
 Its cock like the claw of Garuda.
 Its match like the lightning of dragons.
 Its ramrod like the medicine of the doctors which removes impurities.
 Its stock like the strong lion which grabs the many beasts into its power.⁶⁴

The whole structure of the ritual shows the greater technological orientation of the tantric powers; while the other rituals address a deity and ask him to intercede to provide the supplicant with success, this *dhâraṇî* ritual is designed to increase the effectiveness of the actual instrument of hunting, without any personal intervention. In this particular case the ritual did not actually have to be performed anew each time; at the end the results are summarized into a *dhâraṇî* that, once having been properly enacted, can be repeated by an untrained layman (the actual owner of the text was a minor official in the banner, or local, administration). The text for a ritual of incense purification of the gun is somewhat less technical and more personal than the *dhâraṇî* text; as incense is offered, Mañjuśrî and Yamântaka are asked to transform the gun in just the fashion above quoted. At the same time the practitioner, using phrases drawn from the Manakhan Tngri prayers, asks that his saddle straps be made bloody, that is, filled with game.

Yet, strikingly, the same manuscript often contains rituals for the gun as well as prayers to Manakhan Tngri and the saddle thongs. Clearly the Mongolian hunter did not often feel these texts to have contradictory messages. As with the fire ritual, both direct invocation of the deity as well as (here, indirect) evocation of the Bodhisattva were seen as complementary, not contradictory, methods. Even odder is that Buddhist rituals were used to advance the aim of killing, but it would take

⁶⁴ Bawden, "Mongol Notes, II" (n. 14 above), pp. 120–21.

a singularly naïve view of the relation between adherence to a scriptural religion and individual conduct to believe that violation or reinterpretation of a religion's precepts must necessarily proceed from allegiance to some other religion such as shamanism.⁶⁵ In a short essay on the evils of drink, the Buddhist cleric Gelegjamtso notes that some evil people refuse to listen to denunciations of alcohol, arguing that since alcohol is offered to the Buddhas in tantric rituals, it must be holy. The lama had to reply that in some tantric rituals feces and urine are also offered to the fierce Buddhas; would you eat them as well?⁶⁶

In summary, then, the various ritual forms of the fire sacrifice represent differing conceptions of the same ritual, stemming not from historically opposed religious traditions but from the inevitably varied concerns and training found among the practitioners of one religion. All of these practitioners saw themselves as part of one Buddhist tradition extending from India to Tibet and thence to Mongolia, as well as extending from Chinggis Khan to the present.

III. MERGEN GEGEN AND HIS NATIVIZATION OF MONGOLIAN BUDDHISM

Given this placing of the fire cult within a pluralist understanding of the Buddhist tradition, we may ask, what was the position of the fire ritual texts composed by Mergen Gegen lama and described above as the second type of offering? These rituals along with the *oboo* ceremonies and others composed by Mergen Gegen have been conventionally described by Charles Bawden as “the legitimization by the lamaist church of what must be considered essentially shamanist practices.”⁶⁷ Peculiarly, in the same author's previous article, “Two Mongol Texts concerning Obo-Worship” to which the first quotation refers the reader, Bawden actually concluded that “it is very hard to distinguish between ‘shamanist’ and

⁶⁵ Note that even the most tantric of the fire sacrifices, which according to Heissig were too Buddhist to be accepted by the people, also specified the breastbone of the sheep as the appropriate sacrifice. Although Banzarov ([n. 4 above], p. 68) claimed that the Buddhist *oboo* ritual composed by Mergen Gegen specifically banned meat offerings as a feature of shamanist worship, this is not so (C. R. Bawden, “Two Mongol Texts concerning Obo-Worship,” *Oriens Extremus* 5 [1985]: 33–34, 40–41). In any case meat sacrifices continue even where the ceremony is completely Buddhist—see Aleksey Pozdneyev, *Religion and Ritual in Society: Lamaist Buddhism in Late Nineteenth Century Mongolia*, trans. Alo and Linda Raun (Bloomington, Ind.: Mongolia Society, 1978), pp. 524–30. Protests against these sacrifices appear not to be directed against shamanism, however defined, but rather against meat eating in general. The Buddhist didactic poet, Ishidand-zanwangjil, denounced the contrast between the worshipers' professed faith in Buddhism and their violation of its commandments not to kill any living being (Sainjirgal and Sharaldai [n. 22 above], p. 56). Michael Walter notes that in isolated Buddhist areas of Nepal, bulls are often sacrificed even at the consecration of stūpas (personal communication).

⁶⁶ Bawden, “On the Evils of Strong Drink” (n. 24 above), pp. 70, 72.

⁶⁷ Bawden, “Mongol Notes, I” (n. 15 above), p. 282.

'lamaist' elements in Mongolian religion, but it appears that *obo*-worship, as described in the two texts [by Mergen Gegen] at our disposal, falls within the general scope of lamaist Buddhism."⁶⁸ It is hard to see why he has gone back on the carefully documented arguments of his previous paper.

An examination of both the ritual context of Mergen Gegen's prayers and of the text of his fire ritual itself suggest that Bawden's earlier conclusion was correct. It is important to keep in mind that Mergen Gegen's works were republished as a complete set of texts for the use of clerics who wished to perform their services in Mongolian.⁶⁹ If Mergen Gegen's fire service was intended for lamas, then indeed we do not have the introduction of Buddhist prayers to a still shamanist audience, but quite the opposite: the introduction of prayers to Mongolian gods to the Buddhist clergy. Several items in Mergen Gegen's work present strong evidence that this is indeed how he saw his role.

The introduction of Buddhism into Mongolia stands out because of its peculiarly intolerant relation to the native religious forces. Elsewhere, in East Asian Buddhism, the new faith coexisted with the native religions in relative harmony. This harmony was governed by a Buddhist philosophy of hierarchical incorporation; that is, Buddhists eventually interpreted the native deities and philosophies as precursors or incomplete versions of the ultimate Buddhist truth. Buddhist sectarians saw the deities and sages of the old religions as reincarnations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas sent to prepare the way for Buddhism, by civilizing the people and teaching the worldly morality upon which base Buddhism could more successfully preach the message of liberation from samsara.⁷⁰ The religions so incorporated did not often passively accept this role as mere precursors of the highest religion, but in any case this role assigned to the native religion meant that simple extermination of the other religion seldom entered onto the agenda of the Buddhist missionaries. At the same time, where Buddhism offered a more elaborate and organized philosophy and clergy than the native religious traditions, these traditions themselves often borrowed (or perhaps "pirated" would be a better word) vast amounts of vocabulary and even whole texts from the newcomer, thus developing themselves into an alternative to Buddhism that in the context

⁶⁸ Bawden, "Two Mongol Texts concerning Obo-Worship," p. 41.

⁶⁹ There were at least two such complete compilations of texts for Mongolian-language services; see Pozdneyev, *Religion and Ritual in Society*, pp. 401–2; Mostaert (n. 35 above), p. 191. Mergen Gegen's compilation was printed at the behest of a prince of Jarud banner in East Mongolia and was probably used especially in Mongolian-rite monasteries of that area.

⁷⁰ See Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation* (Tokyo: Sophia University and Charles Tuttle, 1968); and Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 288–320.

of an opposing, self-consciously autochthonous tradition can satisfy all the needs and requirements that Buddhism does.⁷¹

In Tibet much the same pattern applied; the rival non-Buddhist religion, Bon, while presented in classical texts as an alternative tradition to Buddhism, actually seems to have developed virtually all of its doctrines in self-conscious opposition to Buddhism. Śākyamuni's biography has twelve deeds, and so does that of Shen-rab, the founder of Bon, but while Buddhists turn their prayer wheels and circumambulate temples clockwise, Bon-po do the same motions counterclockwise.⁷² The elaboration of Bon as an institutional religion, like that of Daoism in China and Shintō in Japan, thus seems to have developed out of mixed rivalry and imitation of the immigrant faith. At the same time, though, the Tibetan tradition offered an alternative model for the integration of native faiths into the new religion. In this model, which centers on the biography of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century yogin who came to Tibet to subdue the demons who blocked the building of Samayas monastery, the native deities were subdued by the yogin's superior magic power and forced to take an oath to defend Buddhism.⁷³

When Buddhism first spread to Mongolia, though, neither of these models was applied. The native religion was not seen as a precursor of Buddhism, nor were its deities reinterpreted as incarnations of the Buddha. Still less were they brought under an oath to defend the new faith. Instead, during the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, the opposing religion was treated as wholly false, and its images and ritual articles were burned in great bonfires, while fines were imposed on any who continued to worship them. At the same time *dhāraṇīs* were propagated among the people, with rewards for those who could remember them, and the *onggods*, or felt images which contained the spirits of the ancestors, were replaced by images of the fierce Buddha Mahākala.⁷⁴

The result was a remarkably complete replacement of the original shamanist rituals. As we have seen, the categories of ritual found among most of the Mongols are largely comprehensible in terms of a multifaceted Buddhist tradition, wherein the original ecstatic shamanist use of the spirits of powerful ancestors for apotropaic purposes found no place. Yet, at the same time, many of the pioneer missionaries felt the need to

⁷¹ For Daoism in China, see Erik Zürcher, "Buddhist Influence in Early Daoism," *T'oung-pao* 66 (1980): 84–147; for Shintō in Japan, see Kuroda Toshio, "Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 7 (1981): 1–21.

⁷² Samten G. Karmay, "A General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon," *Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko* 33 (1975): 171–218.

⁷³ Yeshe Tsogyal, *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava: Padma bKa'i Thang*, pt. 2, *Tibet*, trans. Kenneth Douglas and Gwendolyn Says (Berkeley, Calif.: Dharma, 1978).

⁷⁴ See references in n. 52 above.

adapt Buddhism to the Mongolian environment. Neichi Toin, who converted the East Mongols, emphasized the importance of giving rituals in Mongolian, not Tibetan, as well as modifying the music to suit Mongolian tastes, and justified his distribution of previously secret *dhâraṇîs* on a mass basis as an expedient device to develop the faith of the new converts.⁷⁵ Zaya Bandida, who proselytized among the Oirads, also designed a new, more precise, Mongolian script modified from the old Uygur one. In doing so he aimed to make the Mongolian language a more fit vehicle for the transmission of Tibetan texts, including the crucial mantras and *dhâraṇîs*.

Yet Mongolian Buddhist clerics tended strongly toward the replacement of Mongolian with Tibetan as the language of the services, and "Tibetanization" as a whole exercised a powerful attraction on the clerics and lay leaders of Mongolian Buddhism. The most learned of the monks often travelled to Tibet for higher education in the great monasteries of Lhasa, and many never returned. Khutugtai Sechen Khung Taiji, one of the great lay-patrons of Mongolian Buddhism in the sixteenth century concluded his edict prohibiting shamanism and enforcing Buddhism among his subject Mongols by saying, "In short, however things are done in Ui-Tsang [i.e., Central Tibet] of Tibet, thus must it be done in this land and clime."⁷⁶ The continued introduction of new tantric rituals from Tibet through the eighteenth century taxed the abilities of Mongolian translators and often led to the wholesale replacement of Mongolian by Tibetan as the clerical language.⁷⁷ The growing numbers of Mongol monks resident for longer or shorter periods within monasteries in Tibet, such as Se-ra Byes, also may have played a role.

Even so, some prominent lamas, such as the nineteenth-century historian Dharmatâla Damchoijamsu (Tibetan Dam-chos rGya-mtsho), though himself a Mongol writing in Tibetan, deplored the trend of replacing Mongolian language services with those in Tibetan.⁷⁸ In this environment, Mergen Diyanchi, the Wise Meditator, the Third Incarnation of the Mergen Gegen lineage (1717–66), hoped strongly to reconstruct the model of Buddhism's relation to Mongolia, first, by providing a rich array of services in the Mongolian language, and second, by reinterpreting the relation of the Buddhist church with the native religious powers, along the lines provided by the legend of Padmasambhava. Chinggis Khan he identified as an incarnation of the chief of the dragons (Sanskrit *nâga*, Mongolian *luu*),⁷⁹ while the local deities of Mongolia he strived

⁷⁵ Damchø Gyatsho (n. 21 above), pp. 356–57, 387.

⁷⁶ Bira (n. 53 above), p. 15. This statement was also quoted in Damchø Gyatso, p. 228.

⁷⁷ Pozdneyev, *Religion and Ritual in Society*, pp. 418–20.

⁷⁸ Damchø Gyatso, p. 357.

⁷⁹ Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia* (n. 34 above), pp. 60–65.

to incorporate on Padmasambhava's example as oath-bound defenders of Buddhism. In his ritual texts devoted to the spirits of the mountains and rivers of Mongolia, he spoke of them as "oath-bound protectors of the faith," a trope taken from the biography of Padmasambhava, even though the histories of Mongolian Buddhism knew of no hostility to Buddhism among these local spirits, such as had occurred in Tibet. Mergen Diyanchi greatly respected Neichi Toin; in his verse eulogy of the cleric, to be included in the services, he not only praised how Neichi Toin preached the dharma of Mañjuśrī Lubsangragba in Mongolian, but also explicitly identified the Mongolian missionary's role with that of Padmasambhava in Tibet:

With great magical power
Like the power of the Urygen Padmā
[=Padmasambhava, who was from Urygen]
All the ancestral spirits (*onggod calig*)
And other violent ones
He trampled under foot
And put to the oath.⁸⁰

In his fire text as well, Mergen Gegen includes a crucial phrase that explicitly links the worship of the fire goddess with the pre-Buddhist Mongolian traditions:

She who from ancient day has grown but firmer still,
The deity who is the spirit (*onggod*) of the ancestors,
Rejoice on the occasion of this rite
And may you guard us all forever.⁸¹

Clearly Mergen Gegen wishes to anchor the future guardianship of this fire goddess in her centuries past as a protector of Mongolia. We need not take as necessarily true either that the fire goddess was an ancient *onggod* of the ancestors or that Neichi Toin actually made these *onggod* into protectors of Mongolian Buddhism; indeed, as Mergen Gegen undoubtedly knew, Neichi Toin did not make these ancestral dolls oath-bound protectors of Mongolian Buddhism, but rather burnt them and banned their worship. But it emerges clearly that Mergen Gegen aimed at some kind of rehabilitation of the ancestral Mongolian traditions and that he felt that his predecessors, like Neichi Toin, however great their accomplishments, had dealt too hastily with the native spirits of Mon-

⁸⁰ Galluu and Jirantai (n. 42 above), p. 464.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 379.

golia.⁸² Trampling the *onggods* under foot should not have involved destroying their images and sacred structures but rather forcing them to recognize the superior power of the Buddha and then consecrating them to the service of the Dharma, just as Padmasambhava had done in Tibet.

We can thus put in place of the two-tier model's predictable picture of a clerical figure forced to make concessions to popular superstition a far more complex and perceptive thinker, who, despite his allegiance to Tibetan-rite Buddhism as he knew it, felt disturbed at the shallowness of its roots in Mongolia. To Mergen Gegen, the Mongols were not, as they are to modern scholars, persistent shamanists constitutionally incapable of rising above the alleged limitations of their nomadic background, but rather Buddhists who had turned their back on their past with the excessive fervor of the newly converted. As it turned out, his effort to Mongolize Buddhism was not a success—the dominance of the Tibetan model only increased after the heady days of the high Qing empire. Despite this failure, though, his analysis of the problem suggests that students of Mongolian Buddhism must go beyond the limiting and simplistic models of religion now current.

Indiana University at Bloomington

⁸² Other brief discussions of the Mergen Gegen's appropriation of local Mongolian cults can be found in Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, pp. 44, 60, 64, 73, 79–81, and 104–5; and Bawden, "The Supernatural Element in Sickness and Death," pt. 1 (n. 25 above), p. 242.