

Central Asia



Laetitia Merli, *De l'ombre à la lumière, de l'individu à la nation: Ethnographie du renouveau chamanique en Mongolie postcommuniste* (From shadow to light, from the individual to the nation: An ethnography of the shamanic revival in post-communist Mongolia)

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RESEARCHERS have recently shown an increased interest in the diverse aspects of the phenomenon of shamanic revival in post-communist Mongolia. Although there have been a number of studies on this topic, the particular sample and context of Laetitia Merli's work gives it a distinctive character. In this volume, a revised and updated version of her doctoral dissertation in anthropology, the author presents an ethnographic investigation that must be counted as one of the most interesting and

stimulating interpretations of shamanic configuration in contemporary Mongolian society. The nature of the subject lies in the border area common to ethnohistory, folklore, and social anthropology. Conceptually, interpretivism is advanced as a suitable philosophical framework for the pursuit of a study that offers a methodological rationale for a pragmatic, mixed-method investigation.

Drawing on intensive fieldwork research and written in a highly accessible style, this substantial volume provides an integrative analysis in teeming ethnographic detail of Mongolian cultural cults and ceremonies that have been creatively and progressively performed in the post-communist period (1990s) or in a context marked by chaos and misery. More specifically, Merli seeks to engage in cultural, religious, sociological, and political questions deeply grounded in an understanding of the great revival of shamanism observed in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar (Oulan-Bator) and its surrounding provinces of Dornod and Hövsgöl. The study presents a *raison d'être* for an ethnographic phenomenological approach to the work, and data have been gathered variously from qualitative and secondary sources. The author's short "Introduction" (15–21) insightfully gives readers a useful context and a profound sense of immediacy in dealing with this very intriguing topic. This firmly links the book's subject matter to previous research and provides a grounds for the conduct of the study. The book then divides into three detailed and interrelated parts. Part I (Chapters 1 to 5) of the book presents a historical overview of shamans, moving chronologically and thematically "from individual emergence to cultural recognition." This shift in context makes all the difference and puts the ongoing Mongolian shamanic revival in powerful relief. Evidence appears to suggest that this phenomenon of "shamanic renewal" expresses itself in different places, under different modalities of expression, and with different modes of utilization of practices and beliefs (121). Part II (Chapters 6 to 16) then unfolds over eleven substantive short chapters. Here Merli nimbly and convincingly traces the paths of the history of shamanism in the Mongolian People's Republic. In particular, she focuses on the "private healing and the rite per se," with a breadth and depth of analysis covering a variety of ethnohistorical and religious settings. Building on the analysis of the early chapters, Part III (Chapters 17 to 21) finally seeks to depict the phenomenon of what Merli labels "State Shamanism," straight out of the golden age of the Mongol Empire. More specifically, it reveals (or, rather, illustrates), through the presentation of three shamanic centers, the striking interplay of highly specific social, psycho-religious, and political factors in post-communist Mongolia. Here the author's data analysis and the related empirical literature help readers to understand how such State Shamanism, associated with both the cult of Eternal Heaven and the cult of Gengis (Chinggis) Khan (1162–1227), is ideologically reconstructed so as to better serve the nationalist discourse. Of particular interest in these three parts is the author's use of excellent accounts of existing shamanism and well-selected illustrations that enable readers to enhance their stereotypical understanding of the living conditions of present-day Mongolian shamans, the daily conditions of individual sufferers, as well as those found on more ritualistic and festival occasions or settings. In the conclusion, the author sums up the main points of each part, presenting a well-informed, detailed, and documented illustration of the surviving shamanistic practices in present-day Mongolian society.

At the outset it is important to mention that the amount of research evident in this volume is very impressive. In addition to the intriguing substantive content, subsequent subject-headed chapters and sections are carefully supplemented by important ethnohistorical descriptions and secondary sources. Substantially, partially contemporaneous source material allows Merli to reconstruct her book's core argument. In line with relevant empirical evidence provided by AUBIN (1993, 1996) among many others, and with the insights gleaned from the chief secondary source (POP and EVEN 1994), the book systematically describes and analyzes commemorative habits and customs of the past by celebrating symbolically a present whose protagonists intend to legitimize the "tradition." This allows a greater discussion of a larger historical, sociocultural, religious, and political-economic context that evaluates, without taking a clear stand, the shamanic renaissance in Mongolia. In particular, the ongoing phenomenon of shamanic revival is proposed as participating in or accompanying the post-communist process of cultural and identity reconstruction. Throughout the entire monograph, Merli thus strives, from a standpoint of narrative analysis, to bring together these strands and focus on how the historical and sociocultural aspects of shamanic experiences are framed by the post-communist Mongolian state's rearrangement. This provides the reader with a useful holistic framework around which the book's analysis is structured. One observation made by the author here is very telling. Both an unprecedented cultural evolution (re-actualization of tradition)—which takes place, in a latent and ambiguous way, with a return to Mongolian medieval values associated with the traces of the Soviet presence/ideology (for some seven decades)—and the impact of Buddhist acculturation have contributed to transform the dreams of a pure philosophical Buddhism and traditional shamanism (related to nature) into a project that represents a kind of secular religion. The essays in Parts II and III of the book, read as a whole, accurately provide sufficient empirical and secondary evidence to drive this point home. While giving the point a certain prominence, Merli in fact hits upon a key factor—of shamanism, then, only remaining a façade. This is demonstrably true, because of the very fact that on the one hand, "the archaic shamanism does not represent a strong enough ideological system" (310), while on the other, the author aptly adds: "More recently, one can only observe the formalization of the worship of mountains, the supremacy of Buddhism [which authentic chauvinist Mongolians do not recognize] and of a cult of the State referring to the aristocracy of the great empire" (311).

As for evidence of such a hyper-politicized parody, Merli has, during the national celebration (2 August 2004) on the mountain Altan Ovoo located in Dariganga village (Sühbaatar Province), collected and retained a statement from the President of Mongolia, N. Bagabandi, according to which the main goal of the ceremony was to restore "patriotism and national pride" (312). The author points out quite rightly, however, that the main thrust of President N. Bagabandi's succinct statement is manifestly against (or, rather belies) the profound aspiration of the people towards an unbiased identity, since it is undeniable that living and dynamic shamanism differs greatly from the urban propagandist version in the sense that it works "in plain nature, in a yurt or a hut, in a remote, mysterious and exotic place. Similarly [and on a more psycho-religious level, it is readily apparent that many]

Mongolian individuals seek help from shamans from rural areas who practice outside the political arena; the sufferers turn towards an archaic shamanism that meets their expectations as regards the control of forces and is strongly related to shamanic nature and landscape” (313). In this sphere, the prestige of Merli’s careful description and analysis of a variety of alleged factors serves to reveal the driving force behind the many unprecedented sociohistorical changes and cultural and religious adaptations, as well as the political implications described. Throughout the book she vividly keeps readers informed of how the surviving shamanistic practices are, in the midst of these new changes, perceived by and directly affect urban Mongolian residents today.

The book’s great strength lies in its thematic unity and its elegant narrative, or ethnographic style. This can only be experienced if it is read in passages of sufficient length to embrace a full sequence of related accounts and ideas. Merli tells a number of fascinating stories about Mongolian shamans, and their practices and beliefs, from the point of view of their contemporary settings. Another major asset of the book is the high level of exactitude of the ethnographic information provided. During the period of her doctoral studies in anthropology (1997–2003), Merli was fortunate to have visited various field sites and local communities while interacting with many qualified informants and local researchers and observing directly the related rituals. She was also exposed to research and ideas that she could never have imagined. And, most importantly, she assisted in a kind of “updating of the tradition [that] takes place ambiguously with a return to medieval values associated with the remnants of Soviet ideology, certainly bygone, but not yet completely disappeared. For it is this model imposed by the Soviets over a period of almost seventy years that prepared the current access to modernity and has raised awareness of the tradition as such” (17). As I would largely concur with this evaluation, I submit that the author’s attempt to approach a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and issues of this subject makes the interdisciplinary aspects of the book all the more important.

Noteworthy is the way Merli has treated her field sites with the utmost conscientiousness, continually keeping historical developments and larger cultural connections in mind. For all this discussion, it seems, to the French scholar at least, that one must turn to tradition to discover how forms reflect daily life. This argument draws substantially on the author’s extensive primary and secondary-based research into the emergence of shamanic revival in post-communist Mongolia. In terms of tradition, several factors came to light during the author’s intensive fieldwork research. These factors—combined with many straightforward themes set out in the clearest form—are remarkable not only for their contexts but even more for the fact that the present-day Mongolian shamans are put into the scene. First, Merli asserts that the diversity of practices and rituals depends on whether or not to conjure up a curse or misfortune (*haraal*); to call a blessing (*jeröööl*) by virtuous grace (*bujan hišig*) or by vital energy/personal psychic power (*süld hijmor*); or to remove impurity (*buzare*) using black or white spring water (*arsaan* or *rasaan*, actually thermal springs). Secondly, the author identifies two existential poles of such religious beliefs and practices, namely 1. chance (*bujan hišig*, or good luck),

the principle of happiness or good fortune that one asks the spirits to grant according to the merits of the person praying; and 2. misfortune or bad luck that can undermine or affect the soul (*süns*) or threaten the vital energy (*hijmor*) of a man or nation, preventing the nation from growing and the man from prospering until his soul (*süld*) goes to rejoin his deceased ancestors (*ongod*, pl. of *ongon*, protective spirits). Practically, shamanism develops a vision of the world where respect for the environment, ancestors, and spiritual entities brings harmony and prosperity. Evidently, the very fact that this shamanic vision of the world embraces the entire Mongolian culture is a significant step as it shows that shamans and members of cultural associations do not hesitate to cross the social divide in order to make the shamanic system the Mongolian system of reference. Thirdly, the author reiterates her aim to flesh out the aforementioned two-fold dimensional picture by emphasizing the significance and role of Mongolian shamanism in contemporary settings. It emerges from this that the notions of the *bujan hišig* and *süld bijimor* are particularly important in contemporary Mongolia, where people commonly hold the feeling that the sharing of goods/resources and chances is quite unjust. In view of this, misfortune is considered as resulting from the reduction of these active principles. The shaman thus plays a crucial role in attempting to restore and strengthen, through appropriate rites, the harmony between these two active principles (307). All of these religious assumptions are in one way or another correct in Mongolian thinking. Traditionally, the author comments, Mongolian communities have subscribed to the belief that, “Three types of disorders directly attack these two principles; they reduce them or block their beneficial effects, thus provoking misfortune. These are 1. astrological disorders associated with the individual and his place in the temporal cycle; 2. disorders related to jealousy, gossip, and disputes but also to feelings of resentment and frustration, susceptibility to curses, misfortune, and other impure contaminations; and 3. spiritual disorders associated with the vengeance of spiritual entities (spirits *lus savdag*, masters of rivers and mountains and abandoned ancestral spirits)” (307).

Finally, Merli is insightful on many issues which are as relevant today as they have been in previous studies. The context here is interesting. In rereading all these “reconstructions” in relation to the transition from post-communist Mongolia, and thus in quest of its soul and cultural identity (exempt from outside influences), she doubts that shamanism, fluid and diversified, could become “the national religion of Mongolia.” From such doubt it has proved a short step to the following important considerations of the author. First of all, the author cogently underscores the new urban shamanism—recognizing that, in our cities, more harm is caused by jealousy and envy than that attributable to spiritual entities such as masters of the soil (*gazryn ezed*), masters of the water (*usny ezed*), those of rivers and mountains (*lus savdag*), auxiliaries/ancestral spirits (*ongod*), tutelary/protector genies (*sabius*), good destiny/protective spirits (*sabius zaja*), and so on. In addition, and considering the foregoing empirical evidence of urban and renewed shamanism, it is of course true for the author that while the male shamans (*boo*) or female shamans (*udgan*) are adorned with amulets (*shius*) or enter into trances (*buult*, or scenes of the descent of invoked spirits) when calling for prosperity (*dallaga*),

when they actually go for that purpose to sacred places such as *mod* (*boo mod*, or tree man shaman; *udgan mod*, or tree woman shaman) or *ovoo* (altars for offerings set up in forests, on hilltops, or in mountains passes) in order to perform appropriate rituals, it is readily apparent that the experienced shamans (*zaarin*), have, in practical terms, recourse less to divination (*merge* or *mergen*) than to listening to the complaints of their “clients.” There is, let it be said, invention and renewal of traditions rather than a mere renewal of definitive (*ne varietu*) habits and customs. As with many other observers, however, Merli aptly points out that the Mongolian shaman, irrespective of affiliation or title, still continues to play the important role of being an intermediary between the distant wild, ancestralized and territorialized forces, and human city dwellers in search of landmarks, or cultural and identity anchors. In these times of competition against the backdrop of economic crises, the “other” human becomes more dangerous than the spiritual entities that tend to become unique protective figures such as Dajan Deerh, Tev Tenger, the Old Man of the mountain, and the protective figure par excellence that constitutes the couple Chinggis Khan and Mönh Tenger, the emperor, and the Eternal Heaven (307–308).

There is a further consideration to take into account. There have certainly been different centers of shamanic consultation and ritual since the end of the 1990s, and traditions and/or ethnic variations try to unify their different versions (*darhad*, *urianbaj*, *halb*, or *bouriate*). However, our awareness of these factors, according to Merli, does not prevent us from recognizing a general movement among Mongolians, a common trend sensitive everywhere towards aspiring to a “national shamanism, which is able to challenge the hegemony of Buddhism and to deal with foreign religions which try to establish themselves firmly in Mongolia by missionary means” (308). With insight from her long experience with Mongol communities and engagement in ethnographic fieldwork, Merli moves on to set forth a thesis that the new shamanism, reinvented and adapted to this nationalist spirit, finds itself being instrumentalized and secularized, becoming non-dogmatic (emptied of its original spiritual meaning), and excessively ideologized. There are two facts which point to this. On the one hand, “as a pragmatic and private system of misfortune control, its revitalization is positive” (309), but on the other, its secularization and the projection of a double transfer of active principles, namely the human soul (*suns*) transformed into *süld* for the nation and the vital force (*bijmor*) of the living, diffuse the cosmic energy that one would like to see symbolically revivify all the people. This naturally inspires a national cult, and suggests, of course, that “the nation has not only a soul, but also a *bijmor*. As far as it stands, the latter, vital energy, has the ability to grow or decline, regulating in fact opportunity for and prosperity of the individual and resulting in increasing its *bijmor*, so that the development and prosperity of the nation will be assured” (309–10).

What can we make of such a reading of shamanic renaissance in post-communist Mongolia? This book, as has been indicated above, originated from studies used by the author for her doctoral dissertation. Her studies, now in edited form, comprise empirical details: “descriptions, narrations, dialogues and quotations, as well as many other ethnographic elements that leave the readers room to conduct their own reflection and build their own understanding of the complex world presented

to them” (19). For the author, this choice reflects the acknowledgement that “the ethnographic description is not content merely to describe and decode, but consists of an activity of ‘transformation of the visible’ during which the researcher produces more than he reproduces.” Briefly, it is a task of describing variables by “showing connections” (LAPLANTINE 1996, 37, 113). Such an inquiry, as Merli readily acknowledges, involves research into a phenomenological ethnography. The basic task here is “not only to re-transcribe [what the author of this book often filmed], but also to describe so as to produce meaning through the role of highlighting and linking” (19). A careful application of this method to the book’s subject, that is, “the shamanistic renewal in post-communist Mongolia” (17), led Merli to identify in present-day Mongolia the emergence of “different modalities, reconstructions, and the reinvention of shamanism” under two distinct aspects. The first is the private and pragmatic aspect of fortune/misfortune control. It is more described than analyzed throughout the book, and scenes and interviews are presented as they took place (they are briefly explained, as in Chapter 19 on the union *Tev Tenger*). The second aspect is quite symbolic and cultural. It illustrates vague ideological and political desires. In this book, they are highlighted at length, for example, in the explanations given of signs and symbols exhibited during the cults of the state (291–305). Taken together, these ethnographic findings, methodically organized to glean as much information as possible, ingeniously persuade readers that “one passes from a private and therapeutic shamanism to a national shamanism, ensuring the salvation of the people and nation” (309), and that “a shamanism elevated to the higher status of Mongolian religion... has therefore taken place in the process of symbolic construction. It was of course a matter, after centuries of the spread of Buddhism and decades of Soviet policy, of inventing a unified national religion of Mongolia that can embody all the historical and cultural values of Mongolia” (310). In so far as the author has been able to determine, the work of experienced shamans (*zaarin*) of the state is marked by important rituals that signal a progression of activities from the local to the national level.

The thoroughness and clarity of Merli’s ethnographic descriptions and conclusions allow insight into the surviving shamanistic practices in post-communist Mongolian society. This focus on the contemporary Mongolian politico-religious situation seems to me the quintessence of this book, well-punctuated by stories, fascinating concrete examples, portraits, and illustrative photographs, as well as its extensive bibliography and repository of learned notes. Most striking of all, the reader easily understands that there is not one single shamanism in Mongolia. Instead there are practically as many versions of shamanism as shamans studied, and the renaissance (*sergen mandal*) claims of being part of a cultural identity can only be accepted by relying on far-fetched arguments. Overall, one fact has remained evident. Genghis Khan is the founding ancestor but he is “mythologized” when one attributes the “misfortune” of people to the abandonment of the shamanic cult of the state. During the aforementioned celebration (2 August 2004) of the Altan Ovoo mountain, for example, the president of the Mongolian Republic aptly insinuated this religious assumption in these terms: “From now on,” he declared, “this mountain will become the subject of a state cult.” This cult was enacted at this

site for the first time at the behest of Zanabazar (1635–1723), the first Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (*Bogd Gegeen*, or religious chief), the main Buddhist reincarnation in Mongolia. The largest ceremony of this genre was held in 1913 at the behest of the eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (then religious chief of Mongolia). Later, its ban by the Soviets in 1937 would have been perceived as the cause of the Mongolian identity crisis. Nevertheless, in recent years and more specifically since the country's opening to democratic trends, it is readily apparent that the credibility of this cult has increasingly been restored. Viewing the sequence of events, one thing, according to Merli, seems certain from the outset: compared to the two previous major ceremonies organized in 1994 and 1999, the 2004 ceremony appeared to be essentially a veritable cult of the state because of the prominent presence of the president of the republic and the Buddhist religious chiefs. The role of prominent figures here stands central. Only older males and monks are authorized to climb to the top of the mountain in order to place offerings and recite prayers (311–12).

One further point deserves mention in this regard. After offering us a timely analysis of the situation, Merli, in an obvious reference to HERVIEU-LÉGER (1993, 119), goes on to argue that “religion is an ideological, practical, and symbolic system by which the consciousness (individual and collective) of belonging to a particular believer lineage is formed, maintained, developed, and controlled” (310). Taking a broad view, the author is correct in pointing out that the particular lineage is, in this concrete case, nothing less than that dynasty of aristocracies whose many experienced shamans of the state, such as Bajarbileg (283–86), Zorigbaatar (288), or Gerelbaatar (301) steadily claim to be part of. Within the limited scope of the empirical information given, my impression is that the ongoing “cult of the state,” combined with the behavior of the Zaarin of the state in seeking their own prestige, virtually reflects the acknowledgment that the post-communist regime in Mongolia is seeking new sources of legitimacy through a cultural nationalist valorization of shamanism. The book's main discussion ends on a single note from Merli: “Even if it failed to impose itself as a national religion, Mongolian shamanism today is no less lively and dynamic. Today the old shamans are left in the shade and many young shamans are being initiated. If they are no longer reported on in the newspapers, it is merely because from now on they will constitute part of the Mongolian cultural landscape. Conflicts of the first decade of cultural renewal have now given way to a more stable period where shamans have found their place in society. Presumably they have a bright future and that *lus savdag* and other spirits will not be abandoned for quite a while” (313). Evidence would appear to suggest that the great revival of shamanism at the present time displays the persistence of a shamanic system in which one can treat the state as an individual and increase its strength through the intervention of a shaman who is, so to say, transformed, and who puts himself at the service of the people and nation.

The study of the “shamanic revival” within the unprecedented changes experienced by post-communist Mongolian communities is of greatest importance because it provides us with the potent means by which to gain a more profound picture of the interactions between the local and the national, the past and the present. In this book, Merli demonstrates fully her broad readings and knowledge

of works in this field. The book has great merit in that it does not simply attempt to report the facts and rituals but more importantly, it tries to interpret them on the basis of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework or a documentary technique interspersed with participant observation, in-depth interviews, and interpretations. Hence, its publication as the second volume of the outstanding collection “Nord-Asia” certainly reflects its scientific value, as previously recognized in the first volume of DELAPLACE (2008), which explored the art of living with “the next world” of the present-day Mongols.

This book, which has many fine qualities, as identified above, nevertheless does not propose an absolute version of “reinvention” through a shamanic revival or by its ethnological reading of the phenomenon. The lack of a comprehensive index of proper names and/or themes may be a void to fill. In addition, the non-inclusion of page numbers corresponding to the terms or topics listed in the too-short glossary (327–28) and to illustrations (329–30) seems to result in a kind of limited guide for the busy reader. These minor quibbles, however, do not really detract from the overall efficacy of the existing study. For contemporary Mongolian communities in particular, Merli’s book is helpful, as it naturally encourages them to connect to their history and heritage to ensure the continuity of their respective cultures and traditions. Based on exhaustive research and carefully executed studies of shamanic revival in contemporary Mongolian settings, this volume should prove to be essential reading for scholars of North Asian studies and should appeal in particular to the general reader.

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