

SHAMANISM AND TRADITIONAL PLANT KNOWLEDGE IN MONGOLIA

By Marilyn Walker

Mount Allison University, Canada

In June 2006, I accompanied William Fitzhugh and Paula de Priest and their teams of researchers on the Smithsonian's Deer Stone project. As an anthropologist, I was interested in ethnographic commentary on the archaeological, linguistic and genetic evidence for Central Asia as the homeland of a circumpolar complex extending from Siberia/Mongolia into Alaska, the Canadian Arctic and Greenland. While these connections are highly speculative, I found many interesting references to Deer Stone imagery both in Mongolian shamanism and in traditional plant knowledge.

On the road trip from Ulaanbaatar to Muren, and then into Tsaaganuur in the Hovsgol Aimag, I visited archaeological sites to view the Deer Stones and carried out approximately 40 interviews with Mongolians about both traditional plant knowledge and shamanism. From Tsaaganuur, three of us (Amara, Ayush, and myself) left Bill's and Paula's teams and traveled by reindeer and horseback up into the mountains to a Tsaatan spring camp.

Known as Tsaatan in Mongolia and Dukha in the anthropological literature, the reindeer-herders are Tuvan by ancestry but were isolated from their relatives in Tuva upon closure of the Russian-Mongolian border after 1991. In the West Darhad Valley, between Lake Khovsgol and the Tuva border, the Siberian hunters/reindeer herders living in the higher reaches of the mountains and Mongolian herders (yaks, goats, sheep) of the grasslands in the lower altitudes have co-existed and in some ways, blended, thus giving this area a different ethnic and historical character from "Mongolian" culture, which has been heavily influenced by Buddhism.

Tsaatan Mongolians – especially in this region – retain a shamanic world view that has survived persecution and neglect over many generations. It embodies "core" elements of a shamanistic tradition that forms a circumpolar pan-shamanic complex, for instance: the sacredness of the horse; the shaman's drum as his/her "vehicle" into the other world to seek help for problems in this world (the semicircle used on the back of some shaman's drums is described as the horse's hoof); the shaman's dress as a representation of the shamanic tree of life; the memorialization of helpful, ancestral spirits in the

shaman's toolkit; the use of trance as a path to knowledge; and the use of archetypal symbols such as the circle, spiral and equidistant cross to represent and invoke natural forces and subtle energies.

Some Preliminary Observations

Shamanism throughout Mongolia has been heavily influenced by Buddhism and in many areas, the two traditions have blended and co-existed. Some lamas, for example, are also shamans. At other times, shamanism was suppressed by Buddhism, as it was by the Russian state, such that shamans and shamanists were severely persecuted at various times in history.

Today, both shamanism and Buddhism are undergoing revitalization and in some cases, are being reshaped by new conditions and influences. Ecotourism is becoming an important industry in Mongolia, and shamanism is attracting interest from academics, health professionals, trekkers, environmentalists and others. Today, shamans are traveling internationally to meet other shamans and, since many of the ancestral lineages have been broken, are training one another or sharing resources across communities.

Shamans are traveling to give workshops in North America and Europe, or to perform ceremonies at music festivals in Ulaanbaatar. Taking shamanism outside the "home" and community is controversial. It brings in much needed income (many families make no more than \$200 a year), but some people believe real shamans do not charge for their services. I asked one shaman how he worked differently in his home and in a place like Ulaanbaatar: "I don't call up all my [helping] spirits as I do at home, only some of them. It would be disrespectful otherwise. They would be offended and they might not help me when I need them."

Traditional Plant Knowledge

Mongolia offers a wide variety of plants, many of which migrated (as people did!) throughout the circumpolar regions and further south into the southern parts of Canada and beyond. While plant use was not the prerogative of shamans, some shamans did use plants to minister to both humans and animals. The Tsaatan shaman, **Suyan**, who died at over a hundred years of age in the spring of 2006, was known for her reindeer medicine.

The survival of shamanic peoples depends on a reciprocal connection with the land. Relations amongst

place, animals and people are mediated by a shamanic world view and sometimes directly by shamans. A shaman ensures people's livelihoods through ceremonies that, I was told, bring the rain "that makes the plants and animals happy." If they are "happy," then they can be generous to the people whose lives are interdependent with theirs.

Since traditional plant use and a shamanic world view are interconnected in Mongolia, I began to compile an ethnobotany of Mongolia. With **Chulu**, I documented

plants used by the Tsaatan, identifying plants that are used for humans and the reindeer they rely on – for food, medicine, technology and spiritual uses. Among the plants she mentioned was *Lilium pumilum* (white potato). This is eaten raw when people are outdoors, and is also boiled in reindeer milk or steamed. She also described how the twigs of the shrub *Caragana* are bundled together to make a broom or sweeper.

The burning of sacred plants is common in shamanic cultures everywhere. In Mongolia, junipers are preferred for cleansing and purification, where they are available. Juniper is burned in an open fire or it is pounded into a powder and sprinkled onto the little iron stoves in the Mongolian *gers* and the Tsaatan tipis. The smoke drives away bad spirits and pleases good spirits. Some people say they just like the scent.

Whether shamans use plants to any extent depends on their personal preferences, and perhaps also on their ancestral spirits and the kind of knowledge they had when they were living. Certainly plant use is not the prerogative of shamans. Many people spoke to me about the plants they gather and use for their families and their animals, although some, such as **Sanjim** (Chulu's husband), are known for their extensive knowledge.

Next summer I am planning to spend time with Sanjim, Chulu and their son and daughter (who are shamans). Working with a family will provide me with information on how Tsaatan shamanic and plant knowledge is shared between men and women and passed on inter-generationally. I will be identifying plants in the field and documenting important aspects of traditional plant knowledge, such as protocols about collecting, times of the day or year that determine the plant's efficacy, whether the root, stems, leaves and flower should be used together or separated, and how plants are combined in medicines. I expect this to be a long-term project. As one friend, a shamanist, told me years ago, "Every plant is medicine...if you know how to use it."

I would like to thank the following for assistance to my project: William Fitzhugh, Paula DePriest, A. Ochir, J. Oyuuma, Oyunbileg, Badamtsetseg (Badma), Adiyabold, Amara (my translator), and Ts. Ayush.



Darhad shaman's drum showing the "horse's hooves" and the chevron design



Chulu talking about Tsaatan plant use.