Establishing mutual misunderstanding: a Buryat shamanic ritual in Ulaanbaatar

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This article discusses a strange case of shamanic ritual performed for a Buryat family in Mongolia’s capital city Ulaanbaatar. This performance not only differs from those described in the regional literature, but it also seems to challenge some of the models used to account for ritual efficacy. Indeed, while the cathartic use of Buryat traumatic history to deal with a patient’s misfortune in shamanic rituals is quite well documented, this performance stands out for the uncompassionate hopelessness with which spirits spoke of the family’s fate as exiles in Mongolia. Meanwhile, the ever-growing tension between participants, which culminated in an open crisis, would be a sure sign of a ritual failure had it not been the clear result of the shaman’s own efforts to establish mutual misunderstanding between the spirits, the patients, and herself. Drawing on a pragmatic approach to ritual efficacy, this article ponders on the specific purpose of a performance which seems to be aimed at creating a context of miscommunication between participants.

One morning at the end of August 2008, Batchimeg Sambalkhundev and I arrived at Demberel’s house, a log cabin located in Dar’ Eh, in the suburbs of Mongolia’s capital city Ulaanbaatar, where low- to average-income people, or new-comers, enclose portions of land to settle their houses. We had been invited there to attend a ritual of ‘reparation’ (zasal) that was to be performed by Batmönkh, a ‘shaman’ (böö, udgan) we had met a few days ago, after Batchimeg had found her contact in the Yellow Pages, simply looking up ‘shamans’. The ‘reparation’ was supposed to answer adverse conditions experienced by Demberel and his family. After his elder sister had died, in the midst of general economic hardships, he had consulted Batmönkh, who had diagnosed that the ‘door of [his] expenses’ (gartsyn üüd) was open. A ritual was needed to close them and re-create propitious living conditions, by opening the ‘door of income’ (orlogini üüd) for a start. Batmönkh added that this ritual would ‘protect’ (hamgaalah) Demberel and his household against any bad influence, most of all against ‘curses’ (haraal), commonly held to be the plague of urban sociality (Højer 2004).1

One could thus have expected quite a simple and straightforward ritual; one of these treatments often given in Mongolia which are meant to stimulate a household’s
‘fortune’ (hisig) and bar nefarious influences supposed to be swarming around in the big city, without involving much of a personal commitment from the benefiting household. What followed suggests that, to some extent, Demberel’s family indeed expected this. Nevertheless, the actual ritual not only lasted for several hours but decidedly put the whole household to a test. It upset the perception they had of their immediate surroundings and linked their personal misfortune with a collective history of exile and trauma. Batmönh, the shaman, is a Buryat and so are her patients. Although not explicitly present in the initial diagnosis of Demberel’s misfortune, this common Buryat origin, most of all Buryat people’s history and tormented relationship with their distant homeland, figured prominently in the ritual. The ‘spirits’ (ongod), speaking one after the other through the shaman’s mouth, relentlessly reminded the concerned family they could not escape their collective past and their identity.

This was achieved through a ritual performance that seemed very confusing overall. Not only were ‘spirits’ speaking in a way that made it difficult to understand what they were saying, but participants were struggling to keep track exactly of who was speaking when (the shaman or the spirits? which spirit?). Most often they were thus unable to respond in an appropriate and timely manner to the shaman’s and to the spirits’ requests. Moreover, two distinct ritual procedures that were running parallel seemed in blatant contradiction with one another. Indeed while, on the one hand, a straightforward script involving a sheep sacrifice and multiple offerings was seemingly achieving the restorative goal of the ritual – expelling bad influences and ‘harnessing fortune’ (Empson 2012) – spirits contradicted this very process, on the other hand, by stating in so many words that Demberel and his family had no chance whatsoever to ever experience good living conditions, being the heirs of a history they had no choice but to bear as their burden. All in all, the way the shaman addressed the family and interacted with its members, when she gave her voice to spirits or when she provided recommendation as to the procedure of the ritual, would significantly hinder co-operation between participants, creating a situation of tense misunderstanding that culminated in an open crisis at the very end of the séance.

This article focuses on the description of this ritual. Elaborating on the peculiar contradiction it presents, I provide as detailed a rendering as possible of the confusing interactions through which the shaman seems to be artfully establishing mutual misunderstanding between herself, the spirits, and the participants. The discussion of this single ritual is meant as an ethnographic proposition, a puzzle really. As the ritual unravels, as the spirits foretell a grimmer and grimmer future for Demberel’s family, as the shaman puts them in a tighter and tighter spot, giving them no choice but to prove their own inadequacy, the therapeutic purpose of the performance becomes more and more questionable. This article thus proposes an open-ended reflection on ritual efficacy: what was the point of this particular performance? If, for reasons that should become clear, it was not a failed one, then what was it intended to do? All in all, this case will be taken as a welcome opportunity to engage with, and perhaps to question, some of the conclusions brought forth both within the regional literature on Buryat shamanism, and by recent works of more general aim and scope that have undertaken to examine rituals as a specific mode of interaction. To put it rather too bluntly, this ritual seems to unsettle the idea that shamanic rituals, Buryat ones in particular, should always be efficacious devices meant actually to cure patients.
Buryat shamanic rituals and their efficacy

Buryat shamanic rituals are well documented throughout the regional literature on Mongolian peoples – they are probably the most studied ones in the area (e.g. Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Empson 2010; Humphrey 1999; Shimamura 2014; Swancutt 2012). Buryat people in general have received a great deal of scholarly attention within Inner Asia, as much for their pivotal position across the borders between Russia, China, and Mongolia (see Billé, Delaplace & Humphrey 2012) as for their tormented recent history.

The Buryats are the ‘northernmost branch of the Mongolian people’ (Atwood 2004: 60), inhabiting both sides of Lake Baikal in South Siberia. Brought under Russian domination in the seventeenth century, Buryat people became administered by Tsarist rule, which encouraged the settlement of Russian peasants in the area, as well as missionary activity. Despite the spread of Orthodox Christianity from the north, and Gelugpa Buddhism from the south, the Buryats remained famous for their shamans throughout the Tsarist and even the Communist period (Atwood 2004: 64). Right after the Revolution, peasant land seizures drove many thousands of Buryats to emigrate to northeast Mongolia and the Hulunbuir region in China, while many, if not most, of those remaining sided with the White troops or pursued ethnic autonomy. Although an autonomous region was established for them in 1923, the Buryats became a target of Stalin’s bloody purges throughout the 1930s, following renewed uprisings against forced collectivization. Those who managed to flee to Mongolia did not escape punitive measures either, as Mongolia itself became a People’s Republic, and a satellite of the USSR, in 1924. While exiled populations struggled throughout the twentieth century to find again a sense of belonging to the homeland they left (Namsaraeva 2012), memories of kinsmen’s loss or estrangement are still vivid among Buryats on both sides of the Russian-Mongolian border (Empson 2007).

The end of the Communist regime in the early 1990s marked the end of an oppressive anti-religious policy in both Russia and Mongolia, thus enabling Buryat people to resume their previously suppressed shamanic practices (Atwood 2004: 69-70; Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 127). Scholars documenting shamanic rituals performed in Mongolia by Buryat shamans, for a Buryat audience, stress how the revelations made by the spirits channelled in key locations allow the exiled population to get a sense of place on the foreign land they inhabit, and accrue legitimacy vis-à-vis their Halh hosts (Empson 2010). Furthermore, the political, social, and economic changes successively brought about by the ‘unmaking of Soviet life’ (Humphrey 2002) and the development of a market economy have created the conditions for shamanism to be invested as a way of ‘dealing with [the] uncertainty’ (Buyandelgeriyn 2007) associated with this liminal situation. In this context, and in a way that recalls how African ‘occult economies’ have been famously analysed by Jean and John L. Comaroff (1999), Buryat shamanic rituals are seen to make sense of the unexplainable fluctuations of daily life and economic success that accompany the (post-socialist) capitalist system. Through divinatory operations carried out by Buryat shamans, the economic downturns suffered by Buryats engaged in petty businesses are dealt with as misfortunes caused by wronged spirits demanding worship and compensation.

In sum, Buryat shamanic rituals bridge the uncertain futurity of a deregulated market economy and the traumatizing events carried in Buryat collective memory, explaining the conditions created by the first as a consequence of the second. Buryat shamans typically perform rituals whereby they identify and subsequently embody the spirits responsible for a family’s misfortune, thus allowing the patients and their
aggressors to communicate (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 130). Spirits originating from the more or less distant past dramatically reveal through the shaman that they acted out of bitterness for being neglected by their descendants, and negotiate with them the conditions under which they might stop wreaking their revenge (see also Shimamura 2014: 58–9, 269ff.). Pleased with various offerings, and after the family’s promise to resume worshipping them through further rituals, the spirits should be appeased and the patients should overcome the misfortunes they are plagued with. Indeed Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn (2007: 128) describes shamans as ‘living nodes of oral history’, who ‘turn into metaphoric condensations of disrupted ancestral genealogy’ in order to deal with people’s ailments and economic difficulties.

This therapeutic scheme cannot but call to mind Lévi-Strauss’s famous analysis (1949) of ‘symbolic efficacy’ in a shamanic ritual performed by the Kuna of Panama to assist women during pathological childbirth. The ritual is called ‘The Way of Muu’; it consists in a long recitation by the shaman, who describes his own travel to the spirit world to claim the young mother’s soul, robbed by Muu, an ambivalent entity responsible both for women’s fertility and pathologies affecting their womb. Lévi-Strauss, through a close analysis of the content of this recitation, shows how an elaborate symbolism equates the body of the suffering mother with a dark path gradually enlightened by the shaman and his auxiliary spirits. Weaving metaphor after metaphor, the shaman presents the bleeding organs of the suffering mother as the theatre of a mythical battle, thus transposing her acute pain onto a symbolic plane. Through this ‘psychological manipulation’, Lévi-Strauss (1949: 12) argued, the shaman is able to provoke a physiological response from the parturient, who eventually manages to overcome the difficulties that labour initially presented. The shaman’s therapy thus consists in making sense of the woman’s unbearable pain, by transposing it onto a shared symbolic frame that will enable her to gain control of a previously inextricable situation. Although this particular ritual, and Lévi-Strauss’s theory, are never mentioned by authors working on Buryat shamanic rituals, the parallel seems striking. After all, Buryat shamans also deal with the difficulties of specific individuals by making them meaningful in relation to a collective experience of suffering – only for the Buryats, the shared realm of meaning is historical rather than mythical.

Of course, Lévi-Strauss’s masterful explanation has been seriously challenged by further ethnographic evidence on ‘The Way of Muu’. Several authors (e.g. Severi 2007 [2004]) have pondered on the fact that the shaman’s recitation was actually performed in an esoteric language, of which the suffering parturient could only grasp a few words at best. Exit the cathartic explanation, and the meaningful transposition of the woman’s pain onto a collective, symbolic experience: the shaman’s elaborate metaphors appear to the patient as little more than a meaningless sound of voice, a ‘long and monotonous sequence of unintelligible words’ (Severi 2007 [2004]: 232). However, drawing on a pragmatic approach, Carlo Severi showed how this sound of voice itself could act as a powerful ‘acoustic mask’ (2007: 224) and allow, along with other things, the ‘psychological manipulation’ evoked by Lévi-Strauss. To put it in a nutshell, the crux of his proposition is to shift the interpretation of the ritual’s efficacy from the symbols it conveys to the performance it involves, from the content of the discourse to the principles of ritual communication. Severi has not been isolated in his endeavour: William Hanks (2006), for instance, has used the methods of ethnolinguistics to pinpoint even more precisely the principles of ritual communication, on the basis of Maya shamanic rituals of divination. Taking different routes, these authors have intended to
stress how ritual communication differs from usual communication and whether this could explain their efficacy. Hanks has remarked, for example, that unlike interlocutors in usual situations of communication, participants in the rituals he described did not share a common understanding of the context and its premises: whereas the shaman was held to be able through esoteric knowledge to converse with spirits, patients were struggling to make sense of anything at all. The argument put forward by Hanks, in this occurrence, is that Maya divinatory rituals work by establishing a ‘common ground’ between the participants, despite the heterogeneity of their initial standpoint. This common ground is reached through several interactional devices of co-operation, which eventually result in the patients jointly committing to the diagnosis and to the cure delivered by the shaman.

The ritual presented in our article seems to fit in both with the regional literature on Buryat shamanic rituals and with the theoretical propositions made by Severi and Hanks. As in the rituals described by Manduhaï Buyandelgeriy (2007) and Rebecca Empson (2010), the spirits channelled by Batmönkh evoke Buryat history and the people’s estrangement from their homeland, in relation with the difficulties Demberel and his family are facing at that moment. Moreover, throughout the ritual, the shaman and her assistant – who is also her son – develop a very peculiar mode of interaction both with the spirits and with the family, based on a specific use of speech and gestures. This ritual, therefore, seems like the perfect occasion to bridge two strands of scholarship that have developed in parallel so far: one concerned with the efficacy of Buryat shamanism in particular, and the other with ritual communication in general. Yet a closer look into the details of this ritual suggests that while it indeed concerns these two strands of scholarship, it actually fits in with neither. Indeed, in this particular instance, the recourse to the collective suffering of Buryats seems to aggravate the family’s situation, rather than solving anything for them. Moreover, the interactional setting elaborated by the shaman seems aimed at systematically undermining any possible common ground between the participants, therefore posing serious questions about its actual purpose.

A dual ritual setting
The ritual prescribed by Batmönkh, as mentioned right at the beginning, was meant as a ‘reparation’ for the adverse conditions suffered by Demberel’s household. These conditions were thought to have caused the death of his elder sister a few months previously, as well as a general lack of success in their economic activities. Demberel, in his late sixties, was already an aging man by Mongolian standards, therefore the fact that his elder sister’s death was put on the same plane as small economic downturns should not be too surprising. This ritual was different from some of those sometimes described in the literature (e.g. Swancutt 2008), where families shaken by multiple untimely deaths or a severe economic collapse request a shaman’s intervention most urgently. This ritual, instead, was simply meant to cleanse the family from supposed ‘pollution’ (buzar) suffered as a result of ‘gossip’ (hel am), or possibly curses (haraal); but even this last possibility is not particularly alarming or exactly exceptional. Indeed any envious talk about someone – whether it is actually evil-intentioned or not – is considered harmful to his or her ‘luck’ (az) or ‘fortune’ (hishig) and qualifies as a ‘curse’. Mongolians living in Ulaanbaatar today are thus under the constant impression of falling victim to evil influences caused by the gossip their situation might occasion. The only thing one can do really, beside having ‘reparations’ once in a while, is to get
‘protections’ (*hamgaalalt*): bead bracelets regularly rubbed with vodka, cowrie shells attached to a string placed under one’s pillow, paper models of a saw taped on one’s threshold, and so on. Although slightly more dramatic, the procedure followed by Batmönh was not radically different from this kind of measure. It involved a sustained interaction with spirits in order to elaborate on the origin of Demberel’s difficulties, the sacrifice of a black goat and of a white sheep, as well as propitiatory offerings to the spirits of Buryat land. In Demberel’s house that day were present some of his children and grandchildren, as well as his younger sisters, who came to benefit from the ‘protection’ provided by the shaman.

Upon our arrival at Demberel’s house, we found all participants busy setting up the scene. The ritual space appeared to be separated into two distinct areas. Indoors, the shaman sat in the middle of the living room, already giving commands here and there to Demberel and his relatives so as to get everything ready before the ceremony started. On her right side there was a small table on which the vodka bottles and teapots needed for the ritual were displayed, together with ceremonial butter lamps and banknotes, which had been given by all participants that day as an offering to spirits and a compensation for the shaman. Another table, in front of the seated shaman, was used to deposit various and less specific items to be used during the ritual; on a couch behind her were piled all the pieces of costume that she would put on at different stages. On the opposite side of the room, participants crammed along a wall, negotiating space with one another each time they stood and sat following the shaman’s instructions. Navigating hastily through this space, the shaman’s son worked throughout the séance as her diligent ‘assistant’ (*tüshee*), translating the awkward questions asked by spirits to the participants through his mother’s mouth, and passing on the authoritative orders she gave to organize the ritual. In the very middle of this living room, finally, a black cloth had been laid on the floor, on which were being arranged different parts of a black goat that had been slaughtered right before our arrival. On top of the lungs, liver, heart, stomach, and intestines, the head was placed laying upwards, facing the door. A cup containing lit branches of juniper had been put next to this installation, filling the room with a thick and scented smoke.

The other part of this ritual scene was set up outside, in the property’s courtyard: in a much quieter atmosphere, a few young relatives of Demberel’s, under the supervision of Batmönh’s son, were using colourful ribbons to decorate three tall branches planted in the ground, in the fashion of small trees. Batmönh’s son explained to me that they were meant to represent Buryat land (*Buriadyn nutag*): white and blue ribbons were symbols of the sky, while yellow and red ones stood for the sun. Paper models of birds and animals completed the picture, which on the whole was meant as a ritual platform to propitiate Buryat invisible ‘land masters’ (*gazryn ezed*), spirits that animate Buryat land, somewhere around Lake Baikal – it was not specified where exactly.

Within this dual setting, the ritual that started soon after our arrival consisted of two main sets of procedures, which not only remained distinct throughout the session, but even seemed at times to stand in stark contradiction with one another. The shaman, on the one hand, ‘let her spirits in’ (*ongod oruulah*). Assisted by her son, she put on different pieces of costume and, after a few beats on her drum and a few sequential hops, spoke to Demberel and other participants as – that is, not on behalf of, but *embodiing* – a multiplicity of spirits who ‘came down’ (*büü*- ) to her one after the other. On the other hand, the shaman, still assisted by her son, directed a ritual process meant
to expel evil influences and generate propitious conditions for Demberel’s family. This is the part for which the black goat, the white sheep, and the mock trees had been prepared.

**Of scapegoats and white sheep**

The script of this second set of procedures can be easily summed up in a few paragraphs. The black goat, precisely used as a scapegoat, is supposed to act as a vessel through which the evil influences are to be expelled. To this end, some blood is collected from all participants using syringes, and injected into the goat’s organs (mostly its lungs); the whole thing is then tied up as a bundle, and disposed of in a faraway location. This part of the procedure—the disposition of the goat’s organs, as well as the collection and injection of blood—is done independently from the shaman’s possession by spirits. However, when the bundle is about to be tied up, the shaman puts on a more elaborate piece of costume over the one she is already wearing, notably including a hat with iron antlers, and beats her drum next to the goat’s parts before their removal.

The white sheep, conversely, is meant as an offering to the spirits of Buryat land, represented by the mock trees. Its parts are also placed on a cloth laid on the floor, at the exact same spot where the goat was, but the head is turned inwards this time, in order to direct the benefits of the offering towards the household. The slaughtering of the sheep is preceded by a procession of the participants in the courtyard, around the mock trees. At that point, the shaman interrupts the interaction with the spirits possessing her and urges everybody to move to the courtyard. She changes her drum for two horse canes and leads the group towards the northern side of the trees, where participants lay offerings of milk, rice, incense, biscuits, and alcohol. Facing south, Batmönkh then sprinkles alcohol to the spirits of Buryat land, before throwing the cup in the air; it lands facing upwards, indicating that the spirits have accepted the offering. Demberel walks to where the cup has landed to pick it up, and bows down three times towards the trees before doing so. A procession, headed by a young girl holding the smoking juniper, followed by the shaman walking with her horse canes and then by the other participants making various offerings, sets off to walk around the trees clockwise, before stopping again to repeat the same operation. The whole circuit is performed three times, the cup falling upwards each time the shaman throws it. After the sheep is slaughtered, Demberel is instructed to go out once more, sprinkle alcohol libations on the trees, and again throw the cup in the air, in order to check whether the sheep offering is accepted by Buryat land masters. It is, so he bows down one final time before picking up the cup, and reports the good news inside, where the conversation with spirits has resumed.

The meaning of this ritual procedure is transparent enough to all of the participants—if any shred of doubt has subsisted for anyone, it is definitely lifted by the shaman’s son, who provides explanations for these proceedings along with his instructions. Through the successive sacrifices of a goat which is expelled and of a sheep which is offered, Demberel’s family cleanse themselves of the pollution they suffered and re-create propitious life conditions. Meanwhile, they reconnect to Buryat land by worshipping Buryat land masters through the mock tree, as if the only way they can live properly in Ulaanbaatar is by building a symbolic bridge to their distanced homeland. This whole procedure constitutes an autonomous sphere within the ritual; its meaning does not depend on any element outside of it and it seems to achieve its goal on its own.
The bowl falls on the ground facing upwards, the propitiatory sacrifice is accepted, while the polluting agent is expelled – sweet and seamless expurgatory process! – therefore the patients are reconnected to their homeland and their innermost Buryat identity. Everything seems fine.

Yet, the other part of the ritual, the interactions between the shaman, the spirits, and the participants, tells a different story. Not only does the conversation with the spirits ‘let in’ by Batmönk run parallel to the successive sacrifice and offerings to Buryat land masters, it also contradicts the very outcome of the procedure I have just described. Whereas the script of the expurgation and propitiation was from beginning to end a straightforward procedure, the interactions between participants inside the house around the shaman and the spirits possessing her are anything but clear. We now turn to the description of the disturbing and confusing character of this second aspect of the ritual, a far more delicate task.

Buryat curses and dead convicts

By ‘letting in spirits’, Batmönk is supposed to provide Demberel and his family with a clearer and first-hand view of the problems that are affecting them. Of course, these ‘spirits’ (ongod) are very different from the Buryat ‘land masters’ (gazryn ezed) propitiated outside, to whom a sheep is presented: the spirits encountered by the family through the shaman are more or less (rather less than more) expected visitors, who either come and give an informed opinion about the troubles met by Demberel’s relatives or appear to be directly involved in them. Batmönk’s son plays a crucial part in these eerie interactions. Not only does he welcome each spirit with a cup of tea – as any host would for a visitor who calls – followed by a few drinks of vodka, but he also handles most of the conversation with them, translating their odd queries to the attendants, and replying on their behalf when they find themselves short of words.

The shaman’s possession seems to follow a rather stable scheme. Helped by her son, she takes off some pieces of her costume, puts on some others, and then starts beating on her drum while hopping on one foot and then the other. She stops after a few seconds and strikes up a popular tune, yet soon interrupts it to introduce him- or herself as the spirit who is talking through her mouth. This introduction tends to follow the same script: the spirit/shaman delivers a loud and clear ‘Greetings!’ (‘Mendee!’), which is returned collectively by the audience, and then states his or her name as well as where he/she comes from. The audience, which has been standing so far, is instructed by the spirit to sit down. Most of the time, Demberel is placed in front of the shaman and he is supposed to partake in the interaction with the spirit on behalf of his relatives, although, as mentioned earlier, this job is mostly done by the young assistant. After a few words of conversation, and as soon as Batmönk takes off her hat, she starts again speaking as herself, before she resumes the process by ‘letting in’ another spirit. Although each spirit is supposed to be individually distinguished from the others by a name and a specific costume, it is rather complicated to sort out exactly how many spirits visited Demberel’s house that day, even with an actual recording of the séance. As we will see in more detail in the last section of this article, the script by which each spirit is announced is not always followed. Some spirits jump in without having been introduced, and before the previous one has been clearly dismissed.

From the outset, as the spirits start speaking one after the other through the shaman’s mouth, the situation faced by the household appears to be more problematic than initially expected. The first few spirits, introducing themselves as dead shamans of
the past, not only confirm that Demberel and his relatives have indeed suffered a curse, but insist that it is a particularly nasty one, and that it will take a great deal of effort to be solved. Like the French ‘unwitcher’ described by Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980), the spirits speaking through Batmönkh tell the family members not only that they are caught, but that they are ‘deadly caught’. As the séance continues, meanwhile, it becomes clear that this curse, however strong, is not the only issue the family should worry about. Some of the dead shamans, indeed, come from the neighbouring gaol of Gants Hudag (‘Single Well’ in Mongolian) and scold the family for such a poor choice in the location of their house (‘What an idiotic and stupid animal! Settling where people died!’). While Demberel’s house is not exactly located next door to the gaol, the very name of the neighbourhood, Dar’ Eh, is closely associated with it for Ulaanbaatar residents. Spirits coming from different ethnic groups in Mongolia reveal to the bemused family they had been haunted all along by the roaming souls of convicts who died in this facility throughout the Communist period. Gants Hudag is not just a gaol, it is indeed a symbol. The main detention facility for men in Mongolia, it has been used since the 1930s to detain dissidents and various ‘opponents’ (esergüü) of the Communist regime; it is widely believed to have been the theatre of the most awful tortures. The Internet is still full of stories about obscure figures of the opposition who were made to disappear mysteriously in Gants Hudag after they had had the misfortune to upset the Stalinist regime.

At this point, therefore, Demberel’s problems take a significant turn. Instead of the usual and anonymous threat of a ‘curse’, which befalls more or less anybody in Ulaanbaatar, he finds himself surrounded by ghosts of resentful convicts who directly endanger his family. Instead of a common predicament affecting virtually everybody everywhere, he faces a grim revelation which unsettles his sense of place durably. As a matter of fact, the evocation of shamans of the past who died in custody might recall peculiar memories for Buryats, whose shamans are still remembered to have been repressed by the Communist regime both in Russia and in Mongolia (Namsaraeva 2012). What the spirits reveal, therefore, is not only that dead convicts roam around the house, but that history, really, haunts them. Whether or not Demberel and his relatives were feeling concerned at all by this history, they find themselves involved in it. And if there remained any doubt as to their involvement, it is lifted by one of the spirits (it is not clear which one it is at this point of the ritual), who insists that Demberel tell him which of his relatives are detained in Gants Hudag; as if all the Buryat were potentially victims of the purges and, even more disturbingly perhaps, as if this period had never ended. In other words, the spirits channelled by Batmönkh suggest to an increasingly concerned family that they still suffer the consequences of the Communist repressions, which affected Buryats more than any other Mongolian people. It conjures up a grim view on Buryat collective destiny: even where they fled, even in exile, they stumble upon what they ran from – you can run, you cannot hide. ‘Your destiny is like an overturned cooking pot’, says a spirit, rather uncompassionately.

The misfortune of being Buryat
Ethnic identity in general, and the family’s Buryat identity in particular, figure prominently in the conversations with spirits performed through the shaman and her assistant. First of all, each spirit has a very well-defined ethnic identity, not only because they flag it as soon as they introduce themselves – as on Communist-era identity cards, they mention their ‘ethnicity’ (yas ündes) right after their name – but also because they speak
with a caricature of an accent. Thus, spirits pretending to come from western Mongolia emphatically pronounce the phonemes [x] as [k], in the supposed fashion of western ethnic groups. If this focus on ethnicity and cultural characteristics were not enough to stimulate the patients’ own sense of ethnic belonging, spirits keep making ‘mistakes’ concerning the family’s identity. One after the other, they ask Demberel, ‘Are you Bayad?’ (or Hotgoid, Üzemchin, depending on their own ethnic group), prompting the persistent reply, given more often by the young assistant than by Demberel himself: ‘No, Buryat’. 

Not only that, but several of these ‘ethnic’ spirits, speaking through Batmönh, keep ridiculing Buryats as a group. Hotgoid or Üzemchin spirits stress that Buryats are no strangers to issues of cursing: ‘They keep doing that to each other!’; ‘Buryats are indeed evil-minded!’, and so on. Actually, it is usually Darhads, rather than Buryats, who are considered famous for their malicious cursing in Mongolia (Pedersen 2011: 119-22). Nevertheless, and despite the unfounded character of this sarcasm, the impression can only grow, listening to the spirits talking through Batmönh, that the problem faced by Demberel’s family is not only one of curses, even not only one of haunting; the problem, actually, might be about being Buryat in the first place. Pursued by the history of Communist repression, victims of curses they are accused of sending to each other, Buryats appear nothing short of helpless. As a result, the evocation of the identity and traumatizing history of the Buryats, far from solving anything, dooms the family as passive and ever-misfortunate inheritors of something that is far bigger than them, and yet that they have to carry on their shoulders. Moreover, while the ritual process described at the beginning of the article seemed to enable Demberel and his relatives to establish a successful connection with their distanced homeland, the spirits speaking through Batmönh keep questioning this very connection. Thus quite early in the ritual, a spirit sternly asks the family: ‘How can you hope to be happy far from your home?’ In complete contradiction with the propitiatory rituals made in parallel to this conversation, spirits declare that Demberel’s family should not presume they will connect with their homeland unless they live in it, and that it is a vain hope to expect they will overcome their misfortune while being anywhere else.

One would suppose, following the classic cathartic model of therapeutic rituals presented above (e.g. Buyandelgeriyn 2007), that this tense situation would find its resolution at one point or another during the ritual. One would expect the collective trauma in Buryat history to be efficaciously linked up with the family’s misfortunes, through a crafty happy end that would eventually wrap up the emotional journey taken by Demberel’s family throughout this ritual. Yet nothing of that sort happened in this instance; on the contrary, all prospects of prosperity and happiness were being shut down one after the other as the ritual went on. Demberel, merely intending to stimulate his household’s fortune and get rid of some vague pollution, not only found himself burdened with issues far greater than that, but was made to realize in substance that there was no way these could ever get solved. Quite typically, the divinatory device deployed by the shaman in this ritual indeed associated two distinct yet complementary procedures: a diagnosis, on the one hand, and a prediction, on the other. As neatly theorized by David Zeitlyn (2012), diagnoses and predictions, while very different in their general implications, are often found in conjunction within divinatory processes; one procedure assesses the cause of the patient’s misfortune while the other outlines a possible course of action. As a matter of fact, what seems untypical in this particular instance is not really the harsh and unexpected character of the shaman’s diagnosis, but
rather the hopelessness of the prediction she delivers. Spirits talking through the shaman’s mouth do not outline any alternative course of action for Demberel’s relatives; on the contrary, and in flagrant contradiction with the restorative part of the ritual, the shaman and her spirits rule out altogether the possibility of a positive outcome. ‘Your destiny is like an overturned cooking pot’.

The last turn of the screw was achieved with the family being notified that not only should they carry the fateful weight of being Buryat, but that they were not even proper Buryats. This last development did not actually happen as part of the conversation with spirits; it came up at the end in a fit of anger and was delivered by the shaman speaking in her own voice. Clearly, she had been growing dissatisfied for some time already. For instance, she had frowned conspicuously at the time and efforts needed by Demberel to slaughter the sheep that was meant for Buryat ‘land masters’. It should indeed be the pride of any accomplished man to be able to cut an opening in the animal’s belly, plunge his hand right into its entrails and tear off its aorta in a seamless sequence of gestures – it should not take more than a minute for a sheep to exhale its last breath. Demberel, probably unaccustomed to this task, and visibly nervous, tortured the poor animal for a good few minutes, eliciting impatient comments about his Buryatness and manhood from Batmönh.

Meanwhile, the patients had to follow a few simple rules while preparing the goat, the sheep, or when addressing the spirits: for instance, they had to wear a hat each time they were performing any of these actions. As women went back and forth from the kitchen to the living room, they sometimes forgot to replace their hat when entering the living room in order to take part in the ritual. The shaman snappily commented on it a few times, until she finally lost her temper: facing Demberel’s sister, who was bare¬headed while arranging the sheep’s organs on the cloth, she grasped her hair, pitilessly shaking her head back and forth while admonishing her to be more mindful of what she was doing. The situation only grew more tense, culminating in a last outburst from Batmönh. At some point towards the end of the ritual, she grasped the money that had been placed on the altar for the spirits, which was also the money meant as her compensation, and threw it on the floor. Angrily, she declared that she refused to proceed in such conditions, with people who ignored Buryat customs so crassly. She argued that she was putting herself in danger doing this, as the spirits would come after her and her family would they have reasons to be upset about their conduct in the ritual. Demberel argued she should finish what had been started, to which she half-willingly assented. Anyhow the ritual was soon finished, and we were ushered out of the room by Batmönh’s son, who took us back home.

While in this instance the medium is not exactly ‘thrown out of the séance’ (Schieffelin 1996), she ends it rather awkwardly and the whole case could be seen as yet another example of ritual failure. There is more than one example in the anthropological literature of such bad endings, where confrontations or other kinds of crises come in the way of a ritual’s proper realization (see Hüsken 2007 for a compilation of such cases). It is even quite probable that Demberel’s family were not satisfied with it either and that they had another ritual performed to check whether their problem had been appropriately dealt with. This sceptical attitude would not be untypical of the way patients in Mongolia approach shamanic rituals in general; quite the contrary, Buyandelgerlyyn (2007) showed that doubts about the efficacy of rituals are constitutive of shamanic practice among Buryats today: assuming that the Communist repression caused a disruption in the transmission of shamanic knowledge, people multiply.
consultations in order to maximize their chances of finding at least one able specialist. Paradoxically, the suspicion that most shamans could be mere profit-orientated ritual businessmen ends up boosting demand on the shamanic market, as patients are seldom content with a single performance (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 133-4).

At any rate, and whatever doubts or complaints their patients might have had on their part, neither Batmönh nor her son seemed to consider this ritual as even slightly problematic. In Batmönh’s view, the ritual was so successful that the family could expect to be protected for at least sixty years after it, a whole generation. It seems clear, nevertheless, that the final crisis at the end of the ritual did not come from nowhere. This outcome, or at least the tension that led to it, had been built up by the very frame imposed by the shaman on the interactions between her and the other participants.

Undermining common grounds

As a matter of fact, attention given to the pragmatic setting of the ritual, and to the way communication is carried out between the shaman, Demberel’s family, and the spirits, shows that nothing is ever made to make people comfortable; quite the opposite. To put it in a nutshell, the pattern of interaction set up through Batmönh’s performance ensures that Demberel and his kin are constantly pressured to take part in something from which they are practically excluded.

First of all, and at a very basic level, it is quite hard for the participants to understand much of what the spirits have to tell them, as the spirits speak in a confusing way and in fantastical accents. Even when listened to again and again on tape, what they say sounds more like mumbled fragments of meaningful clauses than actual structured sentences, with references that are often difficult to make sense of.

Meanwhile, Demberel and his relatives are meant to participate in the ritual in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they are expected to follow the directions given by the shaman to prepare the goat and make the offerings, and, on the other hand, they are prompted to answer the questions asked by spirits through her mouth. The shaman, therefore, is constantly switching between two registers of discourse: she speaks either as a spirit, conversing with Demberel and his relatives, or as herself, directing the ritual. These two modes are recognizable by the shaman’s costume (she tends to wear a hat only when embodying a spirit), by her tone of voice (spirits have different voices than her), but most of all by contrasted grammatical constructions. Indeed, while spirits use interrogative and affirmative sentences, the shaman exclusively makes imperative ones, prompting two different modes of ritual participation. In other words, while spirits never give orders,8 the shaman neither declares nor asks anything. However, these two modes alternate quickly and the spirits are sometimes interrupted, so to speak, by the shaman. Therefore, while it comes out strikingly from a transcription of the séance, the alternation between these two types of demands – questions and orders – is quite difficult for the family to follow. Batmönh’s son, most of the time, has to repeat both orders and questions for Demberel or his relatives to actually switch from one mode of participation to another. Often, when the reply is obvious or has already been given before, he will just answer on their behalf.
Communicational opacity seems to be a feature common to many therapeutic rituals, most of all when they imply communication with ‘spirits’ or invisible agents of some kind. Often, this opacity is not total: patients understand some of what is said, the rest of it being blurred or just unintelligible. This has been highlighted for instance by William Hanks (2006: 307) in his in-depth study of a Maya ritual of divination. Actually, Hanks also reports that the shaman switches between two distinct registers, speaking either to the patients in normal tongue or to the spirits in an esoteric language barely intelligible to anyone else. The purpose of the ritual, Hanks aims to show, is precisely to bridge this comprehension gap in order to establish a ‘common ground’ of communication and overcome the knowledge asymmetry between the shaman and his patients. This is performed through a few specific devices of interaction meant to involve the patients in the ritual procedure. At some point, for example, the Maya shaman asks the man his name and place of birth, some information he can easily provide, which gives the patient a feeling of taking part in his own therapy. Progressively, as the patient is requested to corroborate his symptoms and confirm the diagnosis, a pattern of co-operation is established between him and the practitioner, which creates a situation of ‘joint commitment’ in the séance. The Maya shaman draws on his patient’s co-operation in order to make more and more daring interpretations of his sufferings, which eventually results in the prescription of a remedy and a prognosis to which the patient feels somehow committed.

Although based on the same kind of interactional device as the Maya ritual described by Hanks, the ritual performed at Demberel’s house stands in stark contrast to it. Not only is the family shaken by a development of events far more worrying than the initial diagnosis, but Batmönh and her son, throughout the ritual they direct, seem committed to undermine any possible common ground between participants. First of all, the questions asked by the spirits, while always easy to answer, are often downright unsettling and elicit a negative reply that does not open on further exchange. As already mentioned, the spirits speaking through Batmönh make repeated mistakes concerning Demberel’s ethnic identity; they also make mistakes, at times offensive, about his name or where he comes from. At one point a spirit even goes so far as to declare to his face, ‘Green-eyed Demberel? Aren’t you dead?’, to which the poor old man is compelled to reply euphemistically, ‘No, I’m not exhausted yet’. Even when asking simply ‘Who are you?’, the shaman does it in a tone that rather signifies ‘Who the hell are you?’, in a way that fences off respondents rather than involves them in any kind of co-operative process. The attitude of the spirit is at times sarcastic and at times aggressive, but never conciliating or appeasing: Demberel and his family are grilled more than they are actually questioned. Even the rare occasions when they share a laugh with a jocose spirit are brief, as they soon understand the joke is on them; most of the time, though, the chilling grin with which these spirits often pepper their sarcasms has no element of communicative laughter.

To be sure, uncompasionate evaluations of a suffering patient’s situation, as well as trying situations or even aggressive gestures, are far from being unheard of across the anthropological literature on therapeutic practices. ‘Rebounding violence’ (Bloch 1992) proves efficient in many instances to revitalize the weakened and arm the threatened. Thus Madame Flora, the French ‘unwitcher’ followed by Jeanne Favret-Saada (2009), is far from being tender with her patients; she announces imminent death unless action is taken, as well as far more catastrophic events than the already suffering family were ready for. In this case, however, unsettling the patients and ‘setting in train a “clutch of
violence” ’ (Favret-Saada 2012: 436) is directed towards an explicit goal – fighting the witch – and these patients actually feel ‘relieved’, ‘dynamized’, as a result (Favret-Saada 2009: 80). The effect of Batmônh’s ritual seems almost opposite. A relatively unconcerned family find themselves burdened by the unheeded weight of their people’s history, through a sequence of disturbing interactions which never finds any comforting or even dynamizing resolution. Moreover, whereas the ultimate purpose of Madame Flora’s initial consultations seems to be to get the patients involved in a violent retaliation, the way Batmônh deals with Demberel and his relatives keeps preventing them from taking any part in what is happening.

Indeed, while speaking as a spirit, Batmônh uses techniques of communication that fence off her patients’ participation. This is particularly clear when participants are requested to sing along to popular tunes before a spirit is let in by the shaman. Songs, in Mongolia as elsewhere, are the common ground par excellence in situations where understanding or concord between participants in an interaction cannot be taken for granted. Mongolian weddings, where two different – and potentially dissenting – parties have to stay together in the small space of a yurt for several hours in a row, are precisely occasions where singing is used to create a consensual (yet superficial) common ground, following the idea that, clearly, a party cannot fight while singing along to the same song. Now this common ground is laid by the shaman and her son, but only to be immediately disrupted by the incoming spirit. Indeed, every time the audience starts to sing along to a song initiated by the shaman, the voice of a spirit snaps in, cutting short the collective movement that was starting to build up. The contrast is striking between the harmonious melody of the song and the incongruous voice of the spirit jumping in. Each time this happens, one can almost feel the audience recoil and stand back from the ritual scene it was being drawn to.

Yet the most striking technique by which co-operation between participants is disrupted revolves around the cup in which tea, then alcohol, are presented to the spirits ‘let in’ by the shaman. As mentioned earlier, this is the job of Batmônh’s son. As soon as the shaman, speaking as spirit, has sat down, he fills the cup with tea and hands it to her; the ‘spirit’ usually protests, asking for vodka, but eventually takes the cup and ‘drinks’ it. As soon as she finishes it, the shaman throws the cup in the direction of Demberel, who is supposed to catch it and give it back to the son. It is very rare, however, that he actually manages to catch it, as the shaman either throws the cup unexpectedly or misdirects it altogether, forcing Demberel to awkward crouching positions below the furniture so as to recover it. This is particularly striking, as the cup is precisely what could have connected the different interactive frames that run parallel within this ritual: passing from the assistant to the shaman, who drinks while embodying the spirit, it is given back to the assistant by Demberel after he collects it. The small play by which he is made to fail to catch it thus disrupts a circuit that could indeed connect all participants in a single scheme of co-operation.

It is probable that Demberel did not expect he had to participate in any way in the ritual he ordered from Batmônh. He might be accustomed to a completely different kind of ceremony where, like in Buddhist ‘reparation’ rituals, the patient is not expected to do anything, while the expert practitioner is alone in charge of the ‘purification’ (ariiutgal). However, Demberel and his relatives do not appear reluctant to intervene whenever they are asked to, only the mode of (mis)communication established by the shaman prevents them from doing so. In this context, the crisis with which the ritual ends cannot be seen as a failure; on the contrary, it appears as the logical outcome of a
contradictory scheme of interaction developed throughout the whole ritual. Inciden-
tally, while the shaman seems to be the one who sets up this interactional device, she is
affected by it too, as testified precisely by her reaction in these final moments. In other
words, Batmönh not only prevents Demberel and his relatives from taking part in a
course of action to which they are yet requested to participate; she also puts herself in
a position where she has to suffer their mistakes and wrong responses. What Batmönh
is producing so artfully in this ritual is not so much a smoke-screen for the patients as
a context of mutual misunderstanding between all the participants at the same
time.

Conclusion
If this ritual was ever meant to be therapeutic, the least that can be said at the close of
this description is that it does not follow the usual script of such rituals in the region.
While Buryat shamans usually enable their patients to converse with wronged spirits
emerging from a history of exile and repression, thus giving people’s trouble a mean-
ingful resolution, Batmönh and her spirits throw Buryat identity at Demberel’s face;
they impose it on his family as a burden its members ought to carry rather than as a
path towards their recovery. Moreover, whereas Buryat shamans are usually described
as working in accord with their patients to please spirits and give the whole operation
a favourable outcome, Batmönh uses techniques of interaction that seem to prevent the
family from getting actually involved in the process, while she still requires them to
partake in it. So this ethnographic singularity could just illustrate a different approach
to therapy, one that uses destabilization, aggression, and emotional upheavals to elicit
a response on the part of the patients—a model predicated on ‘cruelty’ (Artaud 1958
[1938]: 84) rather than catharsis, to put it in terms of dramatic theory.

Yet this particular example could also be taken as an invitation to think out of the
frame of therapy altogether: could ‘rituals of affliction’, to take up Turner’s vocabulary
(1967: 9), be meant to afflict rather than to cure? What kind of efficacy would this kind
of ritual entail? For one thing, this particular ritual could be seen as a cynical means for
Batomönh and her son to secure customers in a competitive shamanic market. As a
commercial model, surely, curing patients is less profitable in the long run than con-
vincing them they are at the beginning of a long (and costly) process. However, the
aftermath of the ritual does not seem to support this interpretation: not only did
Batomönh gratify the family with a protection of sixty years, but she actually stopped
performing ‘reparations’ for anybody. Very much hoping we could attend another
ritual, Batchimeg and I contacted her many times in the following months: while she
was very happy to talk for several hours in a row about the similarities she saw between
Christianity, Islam, and shamanism, she assured us she had stopped performing rituals
altogether.

Demberel, on the other hand, had continued seeing shamans, and, according to
Batomönh, he was attending rituals on a regular basis. While she never commented on
the opportunity for him to consult despite his sixty-year-long insurance, she did not
seem surprised by it either. Then, if mere client recruitment seems out of the question,
at play here could be yet another kind of recruitment. It might have to do with being
recruited as proper Buryats (indeed the shaman and her spirits heavily insist that
Demberel’s relatives fall short in this regard): that is, Buryats properly afflicted with a
cosmology of exile that will require regular shamanic intervention. This performance,
then, would present us with the strange case of a shamanic ritual that is not meant to cure patients, but rather to foster the long-term affliction that defines their proper existence as members of their group.

NOTES

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1 See also Swancutt (2012: 130-8) for a detailed account of what she calls the ‘Mongolian ontology of bad speech’ (2012: 132).

2 The use of animals as vessels for evil influences to be expelled is well documented in the regional literature (e.g. Bawden 1962), and also of course in the classical anthropological literature (e.g. Frazer 1994 [1906-15]: 579-80).

3 The iron antlers are one of the most stable features of Siberian shamans’ costumes (for a synthesis of the Buryat ethnographic literature on this topic, see Hamayon 1990: 144).

4 These particular ustensils are well documented throughout the regional literature: at the turn of the twentieth century, all Buryat shamans were supposed to have some (Hamayon 1990: 145), as these were the first piece of equipment they were provided with during their initiation. Without these, and in the absence of a drum, a shaman is a ‘walking shaman’, barely qualified to perform the smallest rituals of propitiation. Consistently with what Roberte Hamayon (1990: 474) reports, Batmönkh walked with two iron canes at a time, as an alternative to beating her drum.

5 The process whereby Buryat shamans metaphorically transform an anonymous urban setting into a rural scene reminiscent of their ‘homeland’ is not specific to Buryats exiled in Mongolia. It has been described in the city of Ulan-Ude, in Buryatia, by Caroline Humphrey (1999: 5), who showed how ‘citified shamans’ dissolve the city both ‘outwards’ (towards the countryside) and ‘backwards’ (towards the past) through similar techniques.

6 This contradiction calls to mind Victor Turner’s (1967: 25) analysis of the meaning of the ‘Milk Tree’ in Ndembu feminine initiation rituals: he famously showed that while the exegetical meaning of the tree celebrated the sacredness of custom, and the unity of Ndembu society, the operational meaning of the ritual – that is, what people actually did in it – put in play all the potential dissensions between different factions.

7 The rendering of the accent, however, is incorrect, as western-style accents tend to realize as [k] what the central- and eastern-style accents pronounce [x] only in words with front vocalism. The [x] in words with back vocalism are pronounced [k] in the west too.

8 Thus, when the spirits give the signal that everybody should stand or sit, they generally do it using an affirmative or an interrogative sentence: ‘[We] sit (suuna daa); ‘Don’t you stand up?’ (bosohgüi yuure?).

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Établir un terrain de mésentente : un rituel chamanique bouriate à Ulaanbaatar

Résumé

Le présent article discute d’un cas étrange de rituel chamanique réalisé pour une famille bouriate à Ulaanbaatar, la capitale de la Mongolie. Non seulement ce rituel diffère de ceux décrits dans la littérature régionale, mais il semble en outre remettre en question certains des modèles utilisés pour rendre compte de l’efficacité rituelle. En effet, alors que l’usage cathartique de l’histoire traumatique des Bouriates pour soigner les affections d’un patient lors des rituels chamaniques est très bien documenté, le rituel évoqué de l’efficacité rituelle. En effet, alors que l’usage cathartique de l’histoire traumatique des Bouriates pour soigner les affections d’un patient lors des rituels chamaniques est très bien documenté, le rituel évoqué ici se distingue par l’absence d’espoir et de compassion avec laquelle les esprits évoquent le destin de cette famille dans son exil en Mongolie. Dans le même temps, la tension croissante entre les participants, débouchant sur une crise ouverte, serait un signe clair d’échec du rituel si elle ne résultait pas manifestement des efforts de la chamane pour créer une incompréhension mutuelle entre elle-même, les esprits et les patients. Utilisant une approche pragmatique de l’efficacité rituelle, cet article s’interroge sur l’incapacité de la chamane à élaborer une stratégie efficace pour résoudre les problèmes de santé de la famille bouriate. Le présent article suggère que le rituel chamanique bouriate peut être utilisé dans des contextes de crise ouverte pour créer une incompréhension mutuelle entre les esprits et les patients, mais il est nécessaire d’étudier davantage les stratégies utilisées par les chamans pour fixer le rituel.
le propos spécifique d’un dispositif interactionnel qui semble viser à créer un contexte d’incompréhension entre les participants.

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