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Between the Himalayas and Inner Asia: The Mongolian Case

Cultural interaction between Inner Asia and the Himalayas, the central topic of the Third International Colloquium of SEECHAC, is always relevant in discovering the Mongolian case. The Mongols as heirs to the Inner Asian nomadic economic and cultural heritage in many respects have also been the transmitters of ideas and concepts starting from religions like Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity up to the sometimes hardly recognisable minor motifs of religious, literary or artistic traditions. The mediating role the Inner Asian nomads had played for centuries became controlled by the Mongols from the 13th century with the establishment of the Great Mongolian Empire in 1206. The Inner Asian mediating role became historically significant again temporarily owing to the events of bi- and trilateral meetings between the highest state officials of China, Russia and Mongolia.¹ This contemporary political role of the Inner Asian region has been historically established and is based on a varied network of connections which include the ramifying processes of borrowing, re-borrowing and transmitting.

Having being involved for more than twenty years in field research among various Mongolian ethnic groups and in the elaboration of field records, I have returned several times to the problem of cross-cultural connections of various phenomena in the material and spiritual spheres of Mongolian nomadic culture. I investigated and tried to systematise, for instance, the striking and hidden elements in the material culture of the nomads rooted in the Chinese cultural milieu.²

¹ From the numerous Internet sources, cf. Why Russia, China, & Mongolia Are Boosting Trilateral Ties; <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/why-russia-china-mongolia-are-boosting-trilateral-ties/> (last retrieved 21.10.2014).

² The research was supported by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (2007)

Another project centred on the abundant collection of Hans Leder³ that offered me the opportunity to carry out research on objects of sacred use, i.e. various representations of deities venerated by the Mongols at different levels of the official and folk religious practice. In the exclusive catalogue devoted to particular parts of the Leder collection, I dealt with some aspects of two deity-groups, namely the White Old Man and related figures of Indo-Tibetan, Chinese and Siberian pantheons (Birtalan 2013a), and the mounted warrior deities (Birtalan 2013b) equally important for the nomads and sedentary civilisations. In the present article I will examine the multilateral Mongolian cultural context, touching upon its origins and the current manifestations of its various aspects,⁴ and the question of whether the foreign codes are at all significant in the Mongols' contemporary thinking.

I. THE MONGOLIAN RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

In connection with the central topic of the colloquium, the transformation of some of the religious views professed by the Mongols, which had been practised in the Inner Asian territory prior to the Mongols appearance, or at least earlier than the first Chinese records

and the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA 100613); some articles form its results: Birtalan 2009a and 2009b.

³ The project "Mongolian Ethnographica of the Austrian Collector Hans Leder in European Museums" (2010–2012) was carried out as part of the *Research at Museums (forMuse)* directed by Maria-Katharina Lang.

⁴ I have devoted a separate article to the problem of "objectification of faith" (i.e. the various representations of the deities and ideas represented by particular deities): see Birtalan, forthcoming.

of their existence appeared (circa 4th century AD),⁵ is to be examined. However, here the focus is on the period since an abundance of sources have been at our disposal (starting from the 13th century) and on the following aspects: the religious practices of various groups in the society, the typology of the textual and material phenomena examined and the processes by which the Mongolian phenomena have been transformed.

1.1. Types of Religious Practices Within Different Social Groups

On the basis of the available written and oral sources and fieldwork experience, the following widely accepted classification of the religious practices can be used. Concerning the society in the Mongolian Empire, four groups emerged in the 13th century, all of which have different, but to some extent interrelated religious practices:

1) State ideology, state religion—the politico-religious practice at the level of the ruling elite.

2) Buddhist monastic religious practice of the monks, i.e. a group of people living in a certain isolation from other spheres of life, but also meeting the religious needs of other levels of the society (cf. No. 3).

3) Buddhicised folk religious practice at the level of the masses (lower strata of the society)—in the form of everyday and festive practice (with or without the assistance of religious specialists).

4) Shamanic practice at the level of the elite⁶ and the lower strata of the society—in the form of specific rituals called upon by necessity, i.e. the needs of everyday life, for example the problem-solving rituals of the shamans.

All the above types are characterised by various intricate and complex interactions between phenomena of local and foreign origin. Even the monastic practice is influenced by the effects of the native religious views⁷ and shamanism has also integrated several aspects of foreign (mostly Buddhist) ideas, objects, practices and so forth.⁸ In the present article, the focus is on Buddhism-related phenomena as the main factors that have shaped Mongolian religious views and, in parallel with it, all levels of socio-political, economic

and cultural spheres of life. Mongolian Buddhism is a well-founded phenomenon.⁹ Mongolian “national”¹⁰ Buddhism has particular features differentiating it from other “mainstream” Buddhisms (Tibetan, Chinese, etc.), and is a well-defined notion today (albeit a continually transforming and developing one) that is historically rooted in the common heritage of Inner-Asian empires of nomadic origin.¹¹ It was through the political and economic contacts of the Mongols with the populations of previous Inner-Asian nomadic empires as well as the states that still existed¹² at the advent of the Great Mongolian Empire (13th century) that allowed them to integrate structures connected to Buddhism in all spheres of life (see Birtalan, forthcoming). First of all Buddhism as state religion introduced writing systems to Mongolia for the first time and naturally resulted in a great deal of translating activity (Taube and Cerenodnom 1993, Sagaster 2007) and the establishment of a written native literature. Besides the political necessities of a state religion, another cause for the successful spread of Buddhism lay in its receptive character. Northern Buddhism¹³ incorporated local religious phenomena and this resulted in three important developments (in detail cf. Birtalan, forthcoming):

1) The creation of a new apocryphal textual tradition. This was gradually achieved by recording the primarily orally transmitted indigenous texts into a Buddhist structural framework performed by the use of Buddhist terminology.

2) The appearance of new types of sacred objects in the Buddhist monastic and folk religious practice originally not used by the native population.

3) Perhaps of greatest importance was the incorporation of spirits and deities from the local pantheon into Northern Buddhism and vice versa (from Buddhism into the local practice).

This process allowed Buddhism to become a religion that was compatible with the world view, state ideology and other aspects of the converted population. Parallel with the advent of these new ideas, Mongolian Buddhism changed considerably: as more and more elements from local religious and belief systems were adopted,

⁵ Heirman and Bumbacher 2007, Sagaster 2007, Lhagvademchig 2013: 25.

⁶ This is true only for the first half of the 13th century (cf. the Teb-tengeri episode of the *Secret History of the Mongols*). Rachewiltz 2004: 168–174 (§§ 244–246) and the rich annotation to the episode (*ibid.*: 869–888).

⁷ From the numerous examples, cf. the incorporation of Dayan Degereki, a shamanic spirit into the Buddhist pantheon: Birtalan 2011.

⁸ The practice of the yellow shamans with Buddhicised rituals, textual tradition and objects: cf. Birtalan 1996.

⁹ The aspects of the phenomenon cf. among others: Heissig 1953, Sagaster 2007, Wallace 2015.

¹⁰ Here mainly the Buddhist ecclesiastical and folk religious practice in the contemporary territory of Mongolia is understood.

¹¹ Empires preceding the Mongols and maintaining Buddhism as state religion: Northern Wei (386–535), Kitan Liao (907–1125) cf. Sinor 1990.

¹² Empires like: the Tangut Xi xia (1038–1227), the Jürchen Jin (1115–1234) and the Uigur Oasis states (10th–13th centuries).

¹³ This term is used to indicate the wider context of the Buddhist conversion including not only Inner Asia, but Central Asia and Tibet as well.

Buddhism became a religion that could be practised at all levels of society. The prevailing nomadic culture was less or not concerned with the original philosophical thoughts of Buddhism—instead, they were merely concerned with worshipping deities (and deified spirits) believed to be influential in their everyday activities by sending blessings for the individual or his/her family and community so as to avert bad luck or misfortunes such as personal loss etc. In addition to the material self-interest which underpins these practices (Birtalan, forthcoming), the nomads were also concerned with the otherworldly matters to some extent, namely seeking a proper rebirth in the human world or in one of the Buddhist paradises called *Diwājīn*¹⁴—as a desired realm for a suitable reincarnation. These are the major religious implications the Mongolian nomads are concerned with (to this day).

1. 2. Mongolian Buddhicised Folk Religion: Result of the Mutual Interaction Between Inner Asia and the Himalayas

The Mongolian Buddhicised folk religion emerged from a mutual interaction of “native” (Inner Asian and Siberian) and “foreign” (Indo-Tibetan and to a lesser extent Chinese) religious and philosophical ideas. The definition is based on the Mongolian and foreign sources available since the 13th century (such as fragments from chronicles, travelogues, envoys’ accounts, and sacred texts of written and oral transmission), and on fieldwork experience among Mongolian-speaking ethnic groups since the late 1980s.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-institutionalised practice, with occasional attendance of religious specialists • pursuance of behavioural codes based on the taboos, prescriptions of the original belief system • presence of the aspects of <i>rational choice</i> in the religious practice owing to its “trading nature” —i.e. exchange with the supernatural; in other words, worship (sacrifices, offerings, etc.) for the benefit and protection of the worshipper • presence of worshipper’s faith in the supernatural agents, i.e. that the deities are able to set in operation the mutually advantageous interaction between the human world and the realm of the supernatural | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transformation of the original oral tradition, emergence of the written forms of ritual texts (new terminology, new names of deities and mythological notions were adapted to the old genres), emergence of new ritual genres (written either in Mongolian or in Tibetan, the sacred language of Mongolian Buddhism) • adopting new sacred objects (i.e. ritual paraphernalia patterned according to the ones used in monasteries), unknown before the Buddhist conversion • presence of the mediation of a new type of religious specialist, but only for specific spheres of life (i.e. the monks from the monastery or wandering monks are invited to conduct ceremonies connected mainly to the <i>rites de passages</i> of human life), but less than in the coexisting religions and belief systems (official Buddhism and shamanism) (cf. Birtalan, forthcoming) |
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| <p>I. The dimensions of the Buddhicised folk religion pertaining to pre-Buddhist original religious views and belief systems (elements preserved in the local practice) include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strong mutual coexistence with other spheres of life (economic, social and cultural spheres) • non-institutionalised practice, with occasional attendance of religious specialists | <p>II. The dimensions of the Buddhicised folk religion pertaining to Buddhism, i.e. elements and aspects transformed by the influence of Buddhism or those newly introduced; in other words, the emergence of new, syncretic phenomena in the traditional structures, complementing the old context with new elements, as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incorporation of new deities or attaching new attributes to the primary worshipped spirits (cf. the process of “conversion” of some members of the spirits’ realm) |
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¹⁴ Mong. *Diwājīn*, Khalkha *Dewājīn/Diwājīn* from Tib. *bDe ba can*, cf. Skr. *Sukhāvati*, “the Land of Bliss; Western Paradise” (cf. Birtalan, forthcoming).

1. 3. Strategies of the Buddhist Mission

The Buddhist mission¹⁵ is a well-defined example of the interaction between south and north, the Himalayas and Inner Asia. With regard to its historical context, the so-called “second Buddhist conversion of the Mongols”¹⁶ in the 16th century¹⁷ is a considerably better documented process than the first adoption of Buddhism in the 13th century, and the sources from this period demonstrate quite clearly the key elements of Buddhist missionary strategy. Some decisive phenomena of the pre-Buddhist religious systems were adopted

¹⁵ On the scope and strategy of the missionary endeavour see Heissig 1953, Sagaster 2007.

¹⁶ The division of the spread of Buddhism among the Mongols into “first” and “second” periods is argued in the studies of Mongolian Buddhism. This is a useful distinction and approach concerning the quantity and nature of historical and literary sources.

¹⁷ Heissig 1953, Serruys 1963, Sagaster 2007.

by the missionary lamas and integrated into the Buddhist ritualistic complex. This syncretic set of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist phenomena became the basis of the emerging folk-religious practice. The process of its formation was shaped by two main factors: firstly, in order to broaden the social base for a successful Buddhist conversion, it was necessary for the ruling elite (both secular and ecclesiastical elites) to expand the number of Buddhist believers. Secondly, but of equal importance, the religious needs of the recently converted masses had to be realised within the new Buddhist framework. Consequently, although the process was supervised by the Buddhist missionaries, much of the framework itself was dictated by the socio-cultural needs of the believers.

II. INTERACTION BETWEEN INNER ASIA AND THE HIMALAYAS: EXAMPLES OF THE MUTUAL CONNECTION OF NATIVE AND FOREIGN IDEAS AMONG THE MONGOLS

The textual source corpus used for the present article primarily comprises ritual texts of written and oral transmission,¹⁸ interviews with shamans (e.g. Birtalan 2007) and other persons of the shamans' community¹⁹ and oral narratives, first of all aetiological myths. The written Mongolian corpus of the ritual texts includes the earliest Turfan fragments (13th and 14th centuries) (Taube and Cerensodnom 1993) written in Mongolian and spans a period up to texts created by the 17–19th century Mongolian missionaries (e.g. Neyiči toyin 1577–1653 or Mergen Gegen 1717–1766, etc.)²⁰ who were involved in the Mongolisation²¹ of the Buddhist rituals. The newly created texts follow partly the structure of the Tibetan ritual texts, but contain a number of motifs and structural elements of Mongolian origin, too (Heissig 1953). Although the Mongolian text recitation was sporadic and was introduced only in a limited group of monasteries, the non-canonical corpus written in Mongolian became the basis for the ritual text recitation outside of the monasteries, and its fragments were integrated into the genres performed at festivities and in folk religious rituals, and, moreover, they can be found in the shamanic invocations (Birtalan 2004). But how, if at all, is it possible to identify the supposedly pre-Buddhist layers in the texts of the folk religious practice? For this purpose the mythological text-corporuses of the Buryads and

¹⁸ On the genre typology, cf. Birtalan 2004.

¹⁹ In detail cf. my fieldwork accounts from the 1990s: e.g. Birtalan 1993, Birtalan 2007, etc.

²⁰ On the typology of the texts and samples see Heissig 1966.

²¹ In more detail, cf. Heissig 1953.

Darkhads, peoples who living in the periphery of “Mongolian world” in the outskirts of the taiga region, were Buddhicised later than the Mongols, inhabiting the central territory of the Empire can be used as well. The mythological narratives and the sacred texts of some Siberian ethnic groups, such as the Sakha or the Tungus, may also serve as parallel material for the understanding of the Mongolian pre-Buddhist phenomena. However, the fact that these text-corpora are of considerably more modern origin, recorded from the second half of the 19th century, must be considered as well. An attempt at such an examination was carried out in the study of the images of the White Old Man and the Warrior deities in the Leder-collection in the context of their textual tradition (Birtalan 2013a, 2013b) and the images on home altars of Mongolian herder families.²²

In order to demonstrate the process of transfer, integration and (re-)Mongolisation of various religious phenomena, the following examples are to be adduced: further remarks on the native and foreign characteristics of the White Old Man, a deity of the pantheon accepted at all levels of the Mongols' religious practices (monastic, folk religious, and shamanic); elements in Mongolian oral tradition transmitted by Buddhism (the myth of Cambagaraw, a deity of Indo-Tibetan origin); a form of sacred communication and from the world of ritual objects, the Buddhist rosary used in all spheres of religious practice.

II. 1. A Native Deity With Foreign Characteristics: The White Old Man

In the above-mentioned article devoted to the artefacts of the Leder-collection (Birtalan 2013a), the close connection between the written textual tradition and the images dedicated to the White Old Man was investigated. In this contribution I would like to offer another aspect of the White Old Man's cult,²³ namely the veneration of aged people in Mongolian society and how some features of foreign origin became an integral part of it. The way a society or a group treats the elderly generation, the aged people, reveals a lot about it. A group

²² Concerning the world of sacred objects in addition to field research images, representations which serve or supposed to serve individual purposes, i.e. images for the home altars and some of the community, e.g. images placed on public altars. i. e. the *caklis* and statuettes of the Leder Collection as well as historic photo-material—such as the Albert Khan collection—were examined.

²³ A comparative study of the figure of the White Old Man rooted in the Inner- and East Asian context and such old heroes as Väinämöinen in the Finnish tradition might shed new light on the concept of old age in mythology and the communities of Inner and East Asian ethnic groups, as well.

of people living closer to nature has a more natural attitude towards its aged members. Whether old age is advantageous or disadvantageous for a group in question is illustrated in a Buryad aetiological myth about why the aged people must not be killed. According to the commonly accepted concept, old people who became “useless” for their family had to be killed during a ritual by being entertained to death with delicious food, Bur. *õxe (üxe) üngelxe* lit. “the [sheep] fat glows”.²⁴ Among the Buryads in Mongolia, when a person becomes great-great-great grandfather/mother, he/she says “the one who will entertain me [to death with delicious food] has been born”. In other words, a person after whom the fourth generation has already appeared will become useless to his smaller and larger community. However, the myth narrates how the son saved his father’s life who reached the age to be killed. The advantage of old age is among other things wisdom: the father’s advice saves the realm of Esege Malān (the chief god of the deities in the Western direction) (Birtalan 2001b: 984). This ambivalent relation to the aged is present in the customs of Mongolian ethnic groups too. Researchers²⁵ agree that in societies with a stronger oral tradition the value of the knowledge of the elderly generation is more important. Life-experience and accumulated wisdom are the distinctive features of the aged. Probably the rarity of really healthy old persons in the community also contributed to the deification of the phenomenon and its association with the supernatural (Minois 1989: 9). An aged member of a society holds the secret and mystery of knowledge about the desired long and healthy life. Despite the above-described ritual of “letting the very old persons die”, the elderly were favoured in many regards (cf. the old groom Agsagaldai in epics, or the *ebügens* in historical sources, e.g. Čaraka ebügen, Üsün ebügen,²⁶ etc. in the *Secret History of the Mongols*) (Minois 1989: 9). The most distinctive feature of the original concept of this type of nature-deity, the White Old Man, was his old age. Similar deities are e.g. the grandmothers (Manzan Gürme and Mayas Xara) in Buryad mythology, who are asked for advice by the younger generations of gods (Birtalan 2001: 1011).

In my article on the White Old Man’s representations, I analysed the Mongolian concept in the context of the East Asian deities of a similar role (Birtalan 2013a, Birtalan 2013c). The closest figures are the Japanese gods of good luck, and—according to my understand-

ing—particularly the Korean Sanshin, the mountain god (Birtalan 2013a: 90–91). A remarkable correspondence between the East Asian and Inner Asian (and in this respect also Siberian) conception is the deer-mount of the White Old Man, which appears in the Japanese material and is an important part of the Chinese concept as well (cf. the Chinese depictions of six symbols of immortality). Here I would like to emphasize again the buffoon-like features of the deity (Birtalan 2013a: 91), which seems to be the influence of the Chinese Chan tradition. This aspect of the highly venerated, solemn deity appears only in the Tsam (Mong. Čam) rituals, where this comic side of the White Old Man’s role becomes decisive: he entertains the audience with antics in a deviant manner. However, even this role hides some more serious aspects, such as the fertility purpose when he touches the spectators with his long wooden stick (an attribute of almost all White Old Man type deities). The laugh, joke and humour connected to the White Old Man in the Tsam ritual is very popular aspect of the deity, despite its extraordinariness in the Mongolian cultural context. The strange behaviour is not the sign of senility, only an additional feature of the original characteristics of the deity. And although the original comprehension about the nature deity has been preserved, the way of his representation in the Buddhist and folk religious tradition has been almost wholly changed by the borrowed attributes of Chinese and Tibetan paintings (cf. the six symbols of longevity) (Birtalan 2013a and 2013c).

II. 2. An Indo-Tibetan Deity in the Local Narratives: Sitabrahmā (Cambagaraw) in the Mongolian Local Tradition

The Mongolised Indo-Tibetan deity Tsambagaraw (Tib. Tshangs pa dkar po, Khalkha/Oirat Cambagaraw, Skr. Sitabrahmā “White Brahmā”) became worshipped among the Mongols as an equestrian warrior deity and also as a mountain spirit (Birtalan 2013b: 106–107, fig. 10/5), a genius loci of a mountain in the Altai range. Although its name is of clearly foreign origin, the local population of the Öölds (an Oirat group in Khovd province in western Mongolia) understand the deity as a native one. The aetiological myths about him explain the origin of the name of this mountain spirit in two ways.

1) The mountain was originally called Cast (Khalkha “Snowy”) by the Öölds. Then an artist arrived and prepared a statue of a human shape that reflected the beauty of the mountain and named it Cambagaraw (the story does not explain why). Cambagaraw is considered to be a male genius loci (Mong. *sabday*, Khalkha *sawdag* from Tib. *sa bdag*), the neighbouring mountain’s spirit (Khan Khökhii) is understood as the wife of Cambagaraw who entertains her husband

²⁴ Birtalan 2001b: 984; for a similar phenomenon cf. *The Ballad of Narayama* in Japanese tradition.

²⁵ Cf. Minois 1989 and the rich reference in his monograph.

²⁶ This later had a sacral function, he wore a white dress and was responsible for the ancestor worship in the Chingisid family (Uray-Kóhalmi 1991).

with tea (the spirit's teapot is the nearby lake, the Khar us nuur "Black Water Lake").²⁷

2) The second aetiological myth contains an even more Mongolised explanation of the deity's name. According to the plot, a certain hunter called Tsamba went up the mountain and exclaimed: "*Camba garaw!*" lit. "Tsamba went up!".²⁸ This is a folk etymological explanation of the original name transmitted by Buddhism, but completely forgotten by the local people, who obviously seek an explanation for the strange-sounding name of a sacred mountain.

These stories reflect the Mongolisation of a foreign phenomenon: all the original characteristics of the deity were lost to the local tradition, only the name was preserved, but it also lost its meaning and primary context.

II. 3. Mongolisation of Buddhist Rituals: Non-Native Communicative Elements in Shamanic Rituals

The shamanic texts performed during the rituals are accompanied with different gesticulation and movements as non-verbal communicative elements (Birtalan 2008) with the spirits' and deities' realm, depending on the shaman's creed (black, yellow or white) (Rinchen 1984, Shimamura 2004),²⁹ age and learned tradition. The West Mongolian yellow shaman Kürlä³⁰ invoked spirits and prayed to them in a similar way as Buddhist monks do during monastic rituals, which is unfamiliar and very strange to the black shamans. Sitting cross-legged or kneeling with hands clasped in prayer was originally unnatural for the shamans of the black creed.³¹ The sudden handclaps (a well-known form of Buddhist philosophical disputes) that Kürlä used to attract the spirits' attention³² are not customary for the shamans of the black creed (e. g. for the Darkhads) (Birtalan 2012).

²⁷ *Цамбагарав домог*. http://altai-expeditions.blogspot.hu/2010/11/blog-post_9452.html (last retrieved 11.11.2014).

²⁸ *Мянган уулзалтын нуурны домог*. <http://www.budda.mn/news/1914.html> (last retrieved 11.11.2014).

²⁹ The black shamans practice the most traditional form of shamanism, while the yellow shamans' rituals have been considerably Buddhicised. The white shamans were understood to be less powerful than the black shamans, and among some Mongolian ethnic groups their practice also became Buddhicised to some extent.

³⁰ On his activity cf. Birtalan 2001a.

³¹ Currently the forms of communication with the spirit realm is in transition and this originally not accepted behaviour may also change.

³² This handclapping is different from that of the Buryad shamans we observed during a field work among the Siberian Buryads (July 1999), mentioned also by Hoppál. Cf. Hoppál 2000: 65.

These forms of non-verbal communication are taken from the Buddhist tradition and have become a fundamental part of some yellow shamans' rituals in Western Mongolia.³³

II. 4. The World of Objects: Buddhist Rosary with 108 Beads as Object of Mongolian Shamans

The Darkhad shamaness Baljir (Baljir)³⁴ belonged to the black shamans, who claim not to be influenced by Buddhist ideas and in many respects preserve the "purest" pre-Buddhist shamanism. They may even be hostile to Buddhist monks and invoke curses against the representatives of the Buddhist church (Badamxatan 1965: 217–27). Nonetheless, not only the yellow shamans but also the black shamans use the Buddhist rosary for divinatory purposes; Baljir held her colourful rosary in her hand almost continuously. She explained the use of prayer beads and in addition mentioned that she still prays to Buddhist deities as she used to before she became initiated as a shamaness:

– *How do you identify the malady?*

– Well how to know?! I pray with this rosary (*erxērē umšād*),³⁵ I heal from the inside, I blow from outside, I fumigate blowing with juniper.

– *How do you enchant the patients?*

– I pray the White Tārā [prayer]. There is nobody who knows the whole prayer (*mān' megjem*).³⁶ Then [I pray] so, so.

– *Do you read the White Tara-texts?*

– Yes.

– *Could you read it now? Could we hear it?*

– No, it is impossible, I have forgotten it now. It became incomplete. I was praying it when I was about twenty, thirty, and forty. When I reached seventy-five, my mind became dull.³⁷

³³ NB! Since Mongolian shamanism is in transition, formerly unfamiliar elements in the gesticulation may also become incorporated due to shamans' meetings, travelling abroad, and interactions with foreign shamans.

³⁴ About the fieldwork with the shamaness, cf. Birtalan 1993 and 2007.

³⁵ Praying with the prayer beads (lit. "reading/saying [a prayer] with the prayer beads").

³⁶ Khal., Darkh. *megjem* (Mong. *migjīm*, *migjem* from Tib. *dmig brtse ma*) in hendiadys expression *māni megjem* (*migjīm*) Buddhist prayer, also invocation to Buddhist gods. Pozdneev lists it with the three most frequently recited prayers besides *māni* and *itegel* "faith" (Pozdneev 1887: 26). As shamaness Baljir stated in the interview, she used to be a devoted follower of Buddhism in her youth, supposedly she still knew the prayers she had learned. It is remarkable that she uses these texts for incantation and healing.

³⁷ Archive of the Expedition 22 August 1992 Khöwsgöl province, Ulaan Uul sum, the dwelling of the shamaness (tape-recording).

Even if shamaness Baljir did hate monks and was not keen on Buddhism since she became a shamaness—as she stated several times—she used this typical Buddhist requisite for divination. Her rosary (*erx*) was a colourful rosary with 108 beads. She always used it during scapulimancy (Birtalan 1993).

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Concerning the question of which phenomena found their way from south to north and why, it should not be a surprising statement that Buddhism was the carrier of the ideas, written sources and the world of objects that were transferred from the Himalayas to the Inner Asian steppe and farther to forests of South Siberia. With the advent of Buddhism all the spheres of socio-cultural and economic life underwent a considerable change. With the spread of Buddhism the phenomena transferred from the south (as the written tradition and world of objects) gradually became Mongolised, or even re-Mongolised as in the cases of the image of the White Old Man. It is a clear example of the transformation of the original native deified phenomenon of nature into a conciliated Buddhist deity with lots of characteristics taken from the Chinese non-Buddhist cultural milieu. The White Old Man became reintegrated into folk belief and also the monastic practice in his new form, but again provided with obvious features of belonging to the Mongolian cultural milieu.

Neither is it surprising that the local oral tradition transformed completely the written Tibetan textual tradition³⁸ of the worship of the deities—as in the case of Sitabrahmā. The two local variants on Cambagaraw reflect two stages of integration of an originally non-native phenomenon. And finally the unquestionable presence in shamanic rituals of originally non-native elements such as the Buddhistised way of communication with spirits in the rituals of the yellow shamans and an object of obviously Buddhist origin show the acceptance and Mongolisation of different phenomena in all spheres of sacral life.

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³⁸ Description of deities in *Sādhana*-type genres, cf. the case of Dayan Degereki (Birtalan 2011, Török 2009).

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Fig. 1: The White Old Man behaves himself deviantly during the Tsam ritual performance in Dashchoilin Monastery in Ulanbator (Archive of the Expedition 2006; photo: Péter Báthory).



Fig. 2: The White Old Man makes laugh the audience as during the Tsam ritual performance in Dashchoilin Monastery in Ulanbator (Archive of the Expedition 2006; photo: Péter Báthory).





Fig. 3: The black shamaness Baljir uses rosary for divination and also other ritual-activity (Khövsgöl province, Ulaan Uul district; Archive of the Expedition 1997; photo: Zsolt Szilágyi).



Fig. 4: The yellow shaman Kürlää prays to his spirits and gods (among others to Sitätapatrā, in Mongolian Cagaan šüxert) similarly as Buddhist monks and believers pray (Uws province, Malchin district; Archive of the Expedition 1995; photo: Ágnes Birtalan).