Gregory, Delaplace. "Enchanting democracy: Facing the past in Mongolian shamanic rituals." *Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource*. Ed. Graham Harvey, Michael Houseman, Sarah M. Pike and Jone Salomonsen. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 53–68. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350123045.ch-003>>.

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Enchanting democracy: Facing the past in Mongolian shamanic rituals

Gregory Delaplace

Something is enchanted in the state of Mongolia. Surely, this enchantment has something to do with the fact that Mongolian government has officially allowed shamanism to flourish again alongside Buddhism, after a long period of repressive regimes.¹ And high-ranking politicians, indeed at times the president himself, have been keen since then to have religious specialists conduct official ceremonies on behalf of the government (e.g. Delaplace 2010; Merli 2010). But the enchantment of Mongolian politics in the post-socialist period runs even deeper. More profoundly indeed, the performance of democracy, the embracing of liberalism as an economic doctrine and the enactment of individual liberties have been surrounded with the aura of a certain mystique. This mystique has set what Caroline Humphrey (1992: 377) called the ‘deep past’ at the source of any kind of ‘moral authority’, construing it as a framework within which any decision concerning the collective future of Mongolian people should be made.

Firmly established at the core of this source of moral authority is the figure of Chinggis Khan, considered the founder of Mongolian polity and referenced as the creator of the very world Mongolian people have been bestowed (Shimamura 2014: 22–4, 303–5). Honouring Chinggis Khan’s legacy is more or less explicitly regarded as the prerequisite to any policy or collective decision, at every level of the state. This legacy might take the form of the ‘blood’ (*tsus*) Mongolian people inherited from him,² or that of the ‘(home)land’ (*nutag*) he secured and in which his spirit lives on, or even that of the customs he has established, in a more or less direct way, for Mongolian people to live in ‘harmony’ (*ev*). This general understanding of Mongolian people’s responsibility towards their own past is likely to come up in many kinds of public matters. Most lately, for instance,

politicians have been publicly accused of selling off Mongolian land and collective heritage through mining licences handed out to foreign companies, thus jeopardizing the perpetuation in the future of a vital link with the past: a link that is regarded as the main source of Mongolian – and indeed of the world's – vitality (Irvine 2018).

What 'democracy' (*ardchilal*) is therefore believed to have brought about in Mongolia is first and foremost the collective possibility to claim back and pursue this heritage, while the communist regime is still consistently accused to have acted to suppress it.³ More concretely even, the re-emergence of shamans throughout the country has led more and more people to discover they themselves had shamanic ancestry, as those they consulted came in contact with the spirits of forefathers whose memory had been lost because of the genealogical disruption supposedly caused by communist-inspired materialism before the 1990s (Shimamura 2014). It has become rather commonplace, in post-socialist Mongolia, to blame spirits' anger for the crises met by the country since the IMF's 'shock-therapy' and throughout the liberalization process in the 1990s and the 2000s. Disgruntled to have been let down for such a long time, spirits manifest themselves through shamans and demand proper treatment at last, lest the country will revert to its post-socialist stagnation (Buyandelgeriyn 2013).

Thus, performing democracy in Mongolia could be seen as a matter of enabling people's collective and individual freedoms to achieve the yet unaccomplished potential contained in their illustrious and powerful history. According to Humphrey (1992), this has been done either by *mimicking* or by *embodying* the past; the way these two modalities play out *both* at an individual *and* at a collective level is the main concern of this chapter. While indeed state symbolism is imbued with archaistic references meant to call for the return of a time when Mongolian people seemed able to rule the whole world and while politicians *mimic* the deep past they wish to emulate, it remains difficult for them to tap into it in a more direct and authoritative manner, by *embodying* it rather than just representing it. They have had to rely for this on ambiguous and often unruly figures, such as Buddhist reincarnations and shamans.

This chapter focuses on a set of shamanic rituals taking place in Mongolia over a decade, from 2008 to 2019. It sets out to show how – that is through which relational configurations – these rituals work to connect Mongolian people both individually and collectively to a lived experience of their own past. Two main modalities are at play here, whereby the past is *either* mimicked in grand performances directed to a collective audience *or* embodied in the form

of a spirit tending to an individual patient. Drawing on a brief review of the literature on shamanic ritual modalities across South America and Inner Asia, I will show that such a duality is far from being unheard of elsewhere, to the point that it could be considered characteristic of human-organized attempts to relate to the invisible. More specifically, however, the purpose of this chapter is to describe how the practice of democracy – how the enactment of a certain idea of individual and collective freedoms – might be achieved through an ever-transforming set of ritual apparatuses.

Dual shamanic regimes in Amazonia and Asia

It has not been uncommon for social anthropologists writing on shamanic rituals in North Asia and South America – the two main regions in the world where mediumistic rituals have traditionally been branded ‘shamanic’ – to emphasize their deeply heterogeneous nature. Even in the particular case of contemporary Mongolia, it would prove quite difficult to single out one specific form of ritual protocol as characteristic of what Mongolian people might recognize as ‘shamanism’ (*böö mörgöl*) in general. This is not only due to the fact that, as Mongolian shamans themselves like to emphasize, ‘there are as many ways to shamanize as there are shamans’ (*böö böögiin böölöh ondoo*, quoted in Buyandelgeriyn 1999) – and indeed, we shall see here that there *is* a singularly dynamic inventiveness at play in Mongolian shamanism nowadays. Yet, beyond the inherent multifarious character of shamanic practices, anthropologists working in North Asia and South America have often recognized a *dual nature* to these practices.

In a volume they co-edited in 1994, Caroline Humphrey and Nicholas Thomas stressed what they felt was a bias in cross-cultural studies of shamanism. Shamans, they argued, were consistently characterized through their role as inspirational healers and the ‘ecstatic techniques’ (*à la* Eliade 1964) they mobilized or even on the characterization of their supposed ‘mode of consciousness’. As a rule, shamans tended to be considered as ‘single ritual practitioners’, rather than as political actors in their own right: the volume was thus an attempt to consider how shamanism as a ritual practice could be shaped by the state and how it may shape it in return. For many contributors to the volume, this implied distinguishing between different *kinds* of shamanism.

In his seminal contribution to the volume, Stephen Hugh-Jones (1994) thus identified two main ritual modalities across the North-western Amazonian

societies of Arawakan and Tukanoan linguistic ensembles; he branded these two ideal types ‘vertical shamanism’ and ‘horizontal shamanism’:

Though all forms of shamanism combine knowledge with inspiration, in [Vertical Shamanism] the predominant component is esoteric knowledge transmitted within a small elite, while in [Horizontal Shamanism] the emphasis is more democratic, depends less on ‘saying’ than on ‘doing’, and involves the more classic shamanistic features of trance and possession.

(Hugh Jones 1994: 32–3)

This translated into a general opposition between two distinct ritual specialists with very different modes of operation. There were people known as *payé*, on the one hand, who made extensive use of hallucinogenic (*parica*) snuff in order to gain heightened perceptive capabilities. This enabled them to locate pathogenic components in a person’s body and evacuate these through various physical operations such as ‘water throwing’ and suction. Besides these powerful and feared inspirational mediums, however, existed another kind of specialists, called *~kubu* in Tukanoan languages, who operated their mediation in a completely different fashion. Rather than possession and drug-induced visionary travels to different cosmic layers of the world, they performed a calm recitation of esoteric chants that described the fate of their patient’s soul and the various stages of its curing.

In her own contribution to the same volume, Caroline Humphrey (1994) showed that in North Asia too, among nineteenth-century Manchu and Daur populations at least, there were two ritual modalities at play which could be called ‘shamanic’ – and they were *actually* called so in Manchu, a language related to Tungus, from which the term ‘shaman’ was indeed borrowed in the first place. She called the first one ‘transformational’: in this context, specialists were religious virtuosos able to let spirits speak through them, to make prophecies about the future and to cure ailments in the present. They were considered powerful, although a bit unpredictable, and they were supposed to have been chosen by spirits themselves. Another sort of shamans, however, showed more of a ‘patriarchal’ orientation, as their ritual activity mainly revolved around the reproduction of the patrilineage. They performed hierarchical rituals meant to revitalize the community through a proper propitiation of ancestral spirits, which were thought to reside in particular locations within the land.

Most recently, Charles Stépanoff (2019) has proposed another dual model to order the diversity of shamanic ritual apparatuses that can be found throughout the boreal regions of North Asia and North America. In a

convincing demonstration spanning centuries of archival material and covering a trans-continental area linking up both sides of the Bering Strait, Stépanoff shows that shamanic practices differ in the way they envisage the particular issue of delegation. While some populations delegate the task of dealing with the invisible to particular people in virtue of their distinctive, innate and permanent ability to do so, others consider that virtually anybody within the community might be qualified to channel non-human presences. Thus, while some populations practice a definitely *hierarchical* form of shamanism, whereby the inequality in religious qualification is both institutionalized and irreversible, some others have kept a *heterarchical* approach to their mediumistic practices, allowing various people for various periods of time to occupy a central position in the administration of human/non-human relations. These modalities are predicated on very different kinds of rituals: hierarchical traditions favour visual and direct performances of the specialist's travel through a well-established cosmic geography, while heterarchical ones characteristically prefer apparatuses where the shaman's mediation disappears, in order to let communication between human members of the community and their non-human counterparts flow freely. The Mongolian cases discussed in this chapter clearly belong to the hierarchical modality in Stépanoff's model. However, in keeping with Steven Hugh-Jones and Caroline Humphrey's own case studies, I suggest there is more than one way to effect the hierarchical delegation characteristic of shamanic practices in these regions. These two modalities involve contrasted interactional apparatuses and a radically different sort of involvement of the specialist's own person within the ritual.

The 'renaissance' (*sergen mandal*) of Mongolian shamanism, its early rise 'from shadow to light' in the capital city Ulaanbaatar, has been well documented by Laetitia Merli (2010). Merli has also described the emergence of a particular brand of shamans, less concerned with individual problems than with the welfare of the Nation as a whole. These practitioners appeared as real public figures, giving interviews in the newspapers, writing books and creating 'shamanic centres' under the auspices of famous scholars and political traditionalist associations. These public shamans thus envisaged their ritual practice as a process of fundamental reconnection between Mongolian people and the invisible entities immanent to the land. Their aim, Merli reported, was not so much to cure individuals as to heal the Nation, or at least, the first was expected to derive from the second. The government itself was called to resume its association with 'state shamans' (*töriin zairan*), held to be able – as they did in the heydays of imperial glory – to lead the country on the path to greatness. Merli

(2010: 239) has described this process as a gradual ‘recuperation’ of shamans and shamanism by nationalist associations and particular individuals who sought to establish it as a state religion – a ‘reinvented’ and ‘reconstructed’ cosmology and ritual practice (2010: 309) that bore only formal superficial resemblance to the individual healing modality it seemed to emerge from. Merli, in other words, has tended to consider this politically oriented, priestly modality of shamanism as originating from people, institutions and strategies external to the shamanic practice itself.

In the remainder of this chapter, I propose to adopt another perspective on the duality of shamanic practices in contemporary Ulaanbaatar. Drawing on a brief description of a few rituals I have been attending since 2008, I will show that while they indeed instantiate two different modes of relating with the past, they can both be seen as political acts – ritual enactments of a perceived ‘democratic’ freedom to tap into the powerful resource of Mongolian history. Whether these rituals allowed ancestral spirits to emerge from Mongolian history to interact personally with an individual or staged a more generic representation of identity, emanating from the performance of certain ‘traditions’, they all enacted ‘democracy’ as an exercise in collectively facing the past. In each case, meanwhile, shamans seemed to follow a specific *modus operandi*. What they effected in both contexts is what I would like to call an apparatus of manifestation: a set of relational technologies, discourses and actions meant to allow something invisible to appear. Thus, while horizontal/inspirational shamans *embodied* spirits in order to keep people away from them, vertical/liturgical ones *mimicked* ancestors in order to connect Mongolian people to their own history.

Embodying spirits and healing people: Inspirational practitioners at work

When I first met Ariuka in 2008 she was just nineteen and yet considered a powerful shaman already. She was welcoming patients in the small space of an apartment on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar, together with her adoptive mother Saraa who was also acting as her ‘assistant’ (*tüshee*) during rituals. Ariuka had completed her initiation the year before with an established shaman, who had diagnosed her as possessing a shamanic ‘essence’ (*udha*). It was understood that she had inherited it from her biological grandmother, herself also a powerful shaman in her time. There had been signs of her shamanic calling quite early in her life: Ariuka would consistently see things that other people could not

or deliver predictions received through visions and dreams. Ariuka's adoptive mother Saraa, on the other hand, was not devoid of a shamanic essence herself either: she had been chronically ill in the years before Ariuka's initiation, to the point of fearing for her life, and no doctor seemed able to point a medical way out of her troubles. The same shaman who was supervising Ariuka's initiation actually revealed Saraa's grandfather was also a shaman himself, adding that Saraa's illness was the sure sign that her shamanic lineage needed to be perpetuated too. As Saraa was too weak and felt too old to accomplish this, it was agreed that Ariuka would take it upon herself to continue both lineages – her own and her adoptive mother's – thus killing two birds with one stone, as it were, through her shamanic initiation.

As a consequence of this particular situation, the configuration of Ariuka's shamanic performances was fundamentally dual: she was conducting two different types of rituals which revolved around the summoning of her two tutelary spirits. During the afternoons, she would call to 'Grandmother' (*Emee*) and 'let [her] descend' (*buulga-*) in her body in order to address matters related to love and romantic relationships. When a woman – patients were mostly women in this case – wanted to 'call a companion' (*han' duuda-*) in order to find a partner, when she wanted to know whether the boyfriend she had found would make a good husband, or else, most importantly, if a wife wanted her husband to stop drinking and/or cheating, she would take her request to 'Grandmother'. Ariuka would put on a white and light blue costume, and she would use a pentagonal drum to conduct the ritual.

After nightfall, on the other hand, she would summon the spirit of 'Grandfather' (*Övöö*), her adoptive mother's ancestor shaman, and she would address darker and heavier issues such as 'responding to curses' (*haarald hariula-*) or more generally curing illnesses caused by envy, gossip and bad-mouthing (*hel am*), which are held to be the plague of Mongolian modern city life (Delaplace and Humphrey 2013; Højer 2019). To this end, she would don a dark blue costume and use a nine-sided drum, which during the day was exhibited in her living room next to the TV set. This and a small altar to 'divinities' (*burhan*) were the only items signalling the ritual vocation of the place in-between séances.⁴

Both ritual modalities, meanwhile, roughly followed the same procedure. Whether she was calling Grandmother or Grandfather, Ariuka started by lighting candles and juniper powder in front of her altar, beating the corresponding drum and reading invocations meant to have it 'come down' (*buuj ire-*). When she would feel the time was right, Ariuka would get up and put her costume on, aided by her mother. Slowly, as if she were already not quite herself – and yet not

anybody else either – she would wear a hat with fringes covering her face and she would slip her hand through the wrist-straps of a whip and a drumstick. In the middle of the room now filled with juniper smoke, she would sit on a stool and beat her drum energetically until the resounding sound became almost palpable to the patients, who were anxiously observing the scene while standing along the walls of the living room. All of a sudden, Ariuka would get up from her stool and spin until she lost her balance and almost fell in her mother's arms. When she would find her footing again, she would look different. Bent in half and barely able to walk, she showed difficulties to breathe. Heavy, hesitant and wheezy, she would be driven by the assistant to a square cushion on which she would sit cross-legged, providing the bemused patients with the vivid impression that a very old person had just entered the room. As soon as she had sat, the assistant would offer tea and hand a pipe to her, in the bowl of which a cigarette had been fitted and lit. As would be expected with any visitor in a yurt, the assistant would then ask her whether she had a good trip, addressing the shaman as if she were an elder. The shaman, with a shrill voice, out of breath – a voice beyond the grave, really – would answer yes, and small talk would ensue.

The patients were then instructed to come one after the other to sit in front of the shaman, in order to converse with what at that time appeared to be a spirit. 'Appear' is probably the wrong term for what was happening at that moment, however, as it was really through everything else than sight that the presence of the spirit could be felt. The shaman's costume, concealing the body and most of all the face of the practitioner, would encourage the patients to mentally distance themselves from the visual image they kept of the person they were sitting in front of and to open themselves to other signs that were somehow blurring her actual identity. When I myself was called up to take a seat in between the shaman and her assistant, I felt something like a doubt as to whom exactly I was interacting with. Surely, this was the shaman, this was still the same individual I had interviewed a few hours before; obviously she had not disappeared. And yet there was something about her, something that felt just a little bit more complicated than this. The wheezing of her breath, the texture of her voice and, most importantly, the sheer heaviness of her clumsy hand on my neck at some point during the ritual let me in disbelief as to whether this was actually a fresh and joyful nineteen-year-old girl who still was in front of me. The powerful sense of presence conveyed in this ritual rested not so much on the fact that the shaman would *look like* a grandmother or a grandfather (apart from the different costume, actually, I failed to see any difference in the way they would each manifest themselves) than on the extent to which she did not quite look like

herself anymore. Doubts were raised, to say the least, as to her exact 'position' as an enunciator (see Severi 2015: chap. 3). Interestingly, therefore, it is as much through a process of concealment and blurring (with the costume, the hat and to a lesser extent the juniper smoke and the heavy drumbeating), as through a technique of representation, that the spirit was made to appear in this context.⁵

Spirits, moreover, were not the only things that were made to appear in Ariuka's rituals: their purpose was actually to make the cause of the patients' troubles manifest to them, to find out which invisible affects had caused visible effects in their lives. This was achieved through the gradual translation and interpretation of the spirit's speech by the shaman's assistant, who led the patient into deducting from cryptic assertions a precise diagnosis on their situation. Both Grandmother and Grandfather expressed themselves in some sort of a coded language: as they were supposed to belong to a past era, they used archaic idioms to say such usual words as 'hello', 'goodbye' and 'thank you.' For the same reasons, they used naïve periphrases to describe items that supposedly did not exist in their time – planes were 'iron birds', cars were 'iron ants' and so on. Some of these idioms were straightforward, but others could be more challenging (a 'white thing', for example, happened to be an hospital), even for the assistant who at times needed to ask the spirit to explain what she meant with a particular expression. As a rule, patients were expected to be able to adjust and quickly learn or guess the code in order to exchange directly with the spirits. Often, however, the distorted voice of the shaman coupled with the opacity of some of the spirits' assertions made it difficult to get the meaning of what was said, and patients turned to the assistant for a 'translation.'

Moreover, the spirit's initial diagnosis was often quite vague ('you've been cursed by an envious person') and needed to be specified in order to make any sense. This was done by the assistant through the parallel questioning of the spirit ('when was that?' or 'what does the person look like?') and of the patients themselves ('have you recently had a promotion which could elicit envy?', 'have you noticed envy around you lately?', etc.). This triangular interaction thus gradually made an invisible cause appear to the patients: starting with the suspicion of a 'curse', they ended up with the conviction they had been affected by 'a curse from X caused by envy after the promotion received at that particular time.' The actual cure was often rather benign and unimpressive (a few gentle strokes on the back with the whip and a liquid preparation of some sort to be poured outside in a particular direction), which suggests that it was really the manifestation of the spirit and the production of the diagnosis that constituted the crux of the ritual.

The diagnosis produced by the spirits harnessed by these inspirational practitioners might be much more serious, however, and it might involve a completely different kind of invisible things. In another ritual I could attend in 2008, a family was made to learn from spirits speaking through a shaman that they were haunted by the wandering souls of dead convicts from a neighbouring jail (Delaplace with Sambalkhundev 2014). In this case like in others (see Swancutt 2008), the ritual apparatus brought about by the shamans was quite different from Ariuka's: instead of summoning two different spirits in two different rituals, they had a series of different spirits intervene successively during each ritual they performed. Some of these spirits were the shaman's tutelary spirits (*ongon*) and manifested themselves almost every time, while others belonged to the particular location where the ritual was held and could appear only once – sometimes even they were the ones responsible for the family's trouble. Beyond the differences each particular ritual configuration would show, these horizontal/inspirational shamans thus worked by making invisible spirits (and curses) appear in order to 'separate' (*salga-*) people from them (fig. 1).

Figure 3.1 Batmönh, a shaman of the inspirational type, 'lets spirits descend' for a family in Ulaanbaatar. (2008).

Mimicking the past and cajoling ancestors: Liturgical shamans at the nation's rescue

Byambadorj is certainly one of the most famous shamans in Mongolia. A prolific author and a media personality, he claims to hold the title of 'state shaman' (*töriin zairan*) and he has a certificate to prove it, issued by an association of Mongolian scholars. At the time I met him back in 2008, he had pictures of him performing shamanic ceremonies with a former president on a national holiday. The liturgy he had elaborated for his rituals was very stable and rather transparent. It revolved mainly around the declamation of invocations – often read out loud from his own books – celebrating Mongolian land, ancestors and imperial history. Absolutely pivotal in this liturgy was the worship of the 'Eternal Skies' (*Mönh Tenger*), generally held to be the overarching transcendent principle in Mongolian people's land and lives and often believed to have been at the very centre of Mongolian religious practice in medieval times. Byambadorj's declared purpose was indeed to re-establish shamanism as it used to be carried out at the time of Chinggis Khan, as a religion of the Eternal Skies that led the Empire to conquer the world, until the conversion to Buddhism estranged Mongolian people from their traditions and ancestors. He was not isolated in this endeavour; other shamans pursued the same goal with varying support from political parties and traditionalist associations, conferring both with spirits and with scholars to recreate the supposedly exact form of ancient Mongolian shamanic practice (see Merli 2010 for an overview).

In 2008 and 2009, Byambadorj received patients in his Shamanic Centre (*Böo Mörgöliin Töv*), where he also conducted rituals in association with several of his disciples. Set up on a small plot of land north of the city, the Centre was dominated by a large stone cairn covered in blue ceremonial scarves. Incoming patients were admitted in a yurt in the middle of the courtyard, flanked with a small cement house used as a shop and as a resting place for shamans in between rituals and consultations. The inside of the yurt seemed to take visitors to another era – mostly imaginary although vaguely reminiscent of movie representations of pre-revolutionary Mongolia. An archaic tripod replaced the metallic stove found at the centre of any yurt today, and the altar opposite the door was crowded with piles of ritual artefacts: spirit figurations of all kinds and depictions of wolves howling in the snow hung next to costumes and ritual props such as wooden sprinkling spoons. Dominating this chaotic hodgepodge, a large portrait of Chinggis Khan seemed to be overseeing the pantheon of tutelary spirits, ancestors and animal figures laid out in this ritual space.

Sitting on the left side of this yurt, Byambadorj and his disciples received patients throughout the week; they came to consult them on all kinds of issues involving misfortune and/or sickness. Using divinatory means, the shamans would deliver a diagnosis, and most of the time, instruct them to come back on Sunday for what they called the 'reparation day' (*zasalt ödör*). On 'reparation day', all the patients' troubles were dealt with collectively through a weekly congregational ritual which could not but evoke some sort of a grand shamanic mass. In order to attend reparation day, each patient was told to bring a specific set of things: a bottle of vodka and a plate of biscuits and candies, and sometimes also a portrait of a particular spirit or deity. When I arrived at the Centre one Sunday shortly before eleven to attend the ritual myself, I found a good fifty people waiting on their own in the ritual yurt, sitting on benches lined up in the middle of the yurt and chatting among themselves about what they should expect. The whole space looked completely packed.

At eleven o'clock sharp, two of Byambadorj's disciples made their entry in the yurt and found their way between congregants to the empty space in front of the altar opposite the door. As an assistant was handing vodka bottles to the shamans, they kept emptying them by sprinkling great quantities of liquor on the altar over the spirit figurations. Chinggis Khan, in particular, seemed to receive a large part of these offerings, to the point of having vodka literally drip from the lower side of his portrait. The two shamans, calm and composed in their full costume, then proceeded to raise their arms, kneel and prostrate themselves before the altar, below Chinggis's and other ancestors' portraits. Then, still raising their arms to the sky, they recited one of the invocations to Mongolia's land, rivers, mountains and tutelary spirits contained in Byambadorj's book, interspersing these with repeated prostrations. Meanwhile, the public was sitting with their hands open and their palms upwards, as if to receive the invisible benefits of the practitioners' invocations (fig. 2). Each time the shamans would pronounce the fortune-calling formula *hurai hurai hurai*, well known to every Mongolian (and not specific to shamanic practice, see Chabros 1992), they were echoed by the whole of the congregation, which did not need to be told so to perform in unison the circular gesture customarily associated with this invocation. The purpose, in this ritual setting, seemed first and foremost to acquire individually a fortune bestowed collectively by ancestors after they were rightly cajoled by the shamans' well-established liturgy.

After new series of aspersions on the spirit figurations, the two shamans ostensibly seized their drums and started beating them in different rhythms while chanting unintelligible words. They acted with a growing excitement

Figure 3.2 Byambadorj's disciples during worship on 'Reparation Day' (2008)

and seemed to progressively lose control of their movements, doing more and more erratic gestures with their torso and their drums. Sometimes, however, *hurai hurai* could be still heard in their chanting (and it was still echoed by the public). Sometimes also place names could be made out from their otherwise incomprehensible chanting. Meanwhile, the assistant had resumed the aspersions and kept drowning the spirit figurations in litres and litres of vodka. After a final prostration before the altar, the second part of the ceremony started, in which each patient was personally seen by one of the shamans, who were now sitting on each side of the yurt. Sitting at a table in front of her patient, a shaman would play on her mouth-harp and ring her bell over the bottle of vodka they had brought, this without uttering a word of explanation about what she was doing. After a while, she would light a match and throw it in the bottle: depending on how it went out, the 'reparation' was judged successful or not, and the operation was stopped or resumed accordingly. In some cases, when the patients had been prescribed a 'body reparation' (*biyeiin zasal*), they were ushered behind a curtain: after instructing them to take off their top, a shaman would spit vodka all over their torso (Byambadorj usually did this part) and wield swords or whips around them with theatrical gestures. Before they left, patients would go and see the other shaman on the opposite side of the yurt, and they would be given a

small parcel containing juniper powder and spring water potentialized with the sound of a mouth-harp. They were instructed to use it to wash their hands and face, facing a specific direction, and not to give away the biscuits and candies they had brought to people other than their own household members.

The difference between the liturgy of the ‘reparation day’ and the spirit-channelling practices of inspirational shamans is striking indeed. The purpose of Byambadorj’s disciples’ invocations and gesticulations in front of the altar seemed not really to have the spirits ‘descend’ in them. Throughout the ritual, as a matter of fact, offerings and prostrations were explicitly (even insistently) made *towards* the altar, suggesting the spirits were still to be reached through their figurations, rather than through the shamans. It is actually even doubtful that the purpose of the ritual was to have spirits appear at all. Their presence, mediated by the obscure pile of paintings and carvings which represented them on the altar, did not vary in intensity throughout the ritual. Most importantly, spirits did not express themselves through the shamans, whose performed trance and beating of drums was not meant to channel an invisible being supposed to deliver a message through their mouth. The impersonation of shamanic folklore and the performance of an imagined past through a fixed and precise liturgy, actually, seemed to be directed less to the audience than to the tutelary spirits themselves. In other words, the purpose of this ‘reparation day’ seemed not so much to allow spirits to deliver a message to ailing humans than to ensure that (ailing?) spirits would get the message that humans were sending to them. And the message to be delivered was rather clear: we Mongols, as a community, are united through our past and our relationship to our land. Pretty much in line with the model of ‘vertical shamanism’ described by Hugh-Jones (1994) in North-western Amazonia, these shamans healed individuals by ensuring first and foremost an ordered and long-lasting collective relation with the country’s tutelary spirits and historical ancestors – rather than through the individual and punctual intervention of a spirit on a single patient through a possessed shaman.

Conclusion

When I went for a visit at Byambadorj’s Shamanic Centre in Ulaanbaatar in the summer of 2019, I was in for quite a surprise. It was his daughter who was running things now, and it was her that shamans and assistants going about in the Centre called their ‘teacher’ (*bagsh*). Byambadorj was still around, people told me, but he did not come so much as before, and he preferred to stay in his

country house where he would receive visits from time to time. His books were still for sale at the Centre – a couple more had come out since last time – and the Centre's activities seemed basically unchanged. A small placard on the yurt's door advertised the daily opening hours for consultations and the schedule of weekly rituals; it was Sunday, and I was planning to attend 'reparation day' as I had done a decade before. My hopes were up, it was almost eleven and several shamans seemed ready to take part; Byambadorj's daughter was not present herself – it was summer, the attendance was low and she was out on a trip – but another young shaman was here to fill up for her and head the ceremony. Another floor had been added to the concrete building and this is where collective ceremonies were held now. I sat on one of the benches, with a bit of a snug confidence in my ethnographic savvy. Nobody knew me, but I already knew what was going to happen. I was waiting for the prostrations, the heavy aspersions, the erratic movements and the invocations drawn from the latest among Byambadorj's books. Perhaps there would be a few changes, something to add in a footnote in future ethnographic accounts, but I knew the basic structure would remain unchanged. It had to, because this was one of the two possible modalities that I had identified time and again in the rituals I had attended since 2008.

And yet, it did not. 'Reparation day' had changed dramatically. After a few aspersions to the altar – still as furnished and eclectic as before, with Chinggis Khan still in the most honoured place – each shaman started beating their drum in one particular section of the room. Some mouth-harp could be heard emerging at particular moments. A particular sonic atmosphere started coming together, piece after piece, to which each performer contributed in an independent and yet coordinated way. Compared to the intentional cacophony I had witnessed back in 2008 and 2009, this sounded like an opposite effort of mutual adjustment. It is not until then that I noticed each shaman was flanked with one particular assistant, who had prepared the tea, vodka and food platter used to welcome incoming spirits during the therapeutic rituals of shamans of the inspirational type. And indeed, one after the other, in an independent yet coordinated way, they started letting in a spirit, transforming their attitude under the influence of the particular spirit they had summoned. Often it was that of an old person, characteristic in the voice, breath and broken posture, but I could also make out other demeanours, such as that of a young coquette. Some seemed to let in one spirit only, others a succession of different ones (fig. 3).

I was quite taken aback. What I had seen Ariuka and many other shamans do in individual rituals since 2008 was now performed collectively. The neat opposition I had held to be structural in Mongolian shamanic practice, between collective

Figure 3.3 'Reparation Day' in 2019

ceremonies directed by liturgical masters and inspirational rituals involving the actual manifestation of spirits, seemed to be blurring before my eyes. What I saw that day may be short-lived, or it might take very soon a wholly different shape; yet it is nothing if not a testimony to the labile character of shamanic practice in Mongolia and to the continuing ritual inventiveness through which Mongolian people cultivate a mystical relation to the deep past they put at the centre of their personal and collective lives. This new ritual configuration could also be taken as a hint and perhaps as an encouragement to look at the relational apparatus implemented during rituals as cosmopolitical device of far-reaching import. Watching these small relational nodes of interconnected individuals, collectively conversing with spirits in an autonomous yet coordinated way, I could not help seeing in this the enactment of a particular take on liberal democracy. Here was a situation of common adjustment where everybody tended collectively to one's own private business in the relative secrecy of mutual anonymity: within this ritual apparatus, facing the deep past became a responsibility that everybody bore collectively, and freely, for everyone else.