

Tuvinian Lama-Shamans: Some Stories from Mongun-Taiga

Marina Mongush and Caroline Humphrey

While we were in Tuva in autumn 1988 working on a documentary film about the lives of herding people we met an old man who told us stories about shamans and lamas. The story-teller was Bair Surunovich Irgit, born on the 8th May 1918, a former herdsman and now a retired resident of the village of Mugur-Aksy in the Mongun-Taiga district of Tuva ASSR. The questions were asked by Marina Mongush. A short section of Bair's story appears in the film, Herders of Mongun Taiga¹, but we thought the full account so interesting that we should publish it, especially as materials on Tuvan shamanism in English are rare. A Tuvinian transcription of the tape-recording of Bair's stories was made by the Academy of Sciences in Kyzyl². It is a translation of this that we present here. However, because Bair's speech was unclear and in a dialect, we have no pretensions to providing a completely accurate translation and some ethnographic points remain puzzling. We preface the text with a few notes to aid in understanding the stories.

From the point of view of comparative religions, an interesting aspect of Bair's memories is that he makes clear that there were in Tuva people who were at the same time lama (lama or xeling, Mo. gelung) and shaman (xam). Elsewhere in the Inner Asian region, for example in the Xovsogol region of North-west Mongolia, the enmity of lamas and shamans is well-documented (Dioszegi 1963). But we also have evidence of shared cults, such as that of Dayan Deerke. The story given below about the conflict between Cheek-Sargan, who seems to have been a lama who practised shamanic rituals, and Saryg Xam, a shaman whose name (Yellow Shaman) suggests Lamaist associations, implies that the categories were mixed, but that a given person was considered to be essentially either one or the other. At the beginning of the century the two powers seem to have been in competition in Western Tuva. From conversation with other people in Mongun Taiga we gathered that the basis for conflict came to be

¹ This film was made by Granada Television in the 'Disappearing World' series and shown in 1989. The director was John Sheppard; Caroline Humphrey was the anthropological advisor and Marina Mongush was the local consultant and interpreter. A video of this film is available from Granada Television.

² The Tuvinian text is available from Caroline Humphrey, King's College, Cambridge, CB2 1ST, if any reader would like to consult it. We have not published it here because of production problems with the script.

seen as opposition between the good, purifying power of the 'shamanic' lama against the harmful power of the 'lamaicised' shaman. Bair indicates in this account, and also in the story about Ulug-xeling, that historically the former was in the process of prevailing over the latter.

About the various spirit-powers mentioned by Bair we may note the following: shamans who took their spiritual origin (or descent) from the Earth and Water Spirits (Chor Sugnung Eeleri) are mentioned by Kenin-Lopsan (1987: 13) and it is interesting that he refers to these spirits as female and 'sisters' of the shaman. Kenin-Lopsan writes, "One of the shamans taking his origin from the Spirits of Earth and Water was Ondar Karzhanmai from Aldyy-Shynaa in the Ulug-Xen district. He was the guard of a pit for grain storage (uurgai). The leitmotif of his shamanising, as V. Sh. Kok-ool informed us, was the establishing of 'connections' with his 'yellow sisters', the high mountains, turbulent rivers and the animals and fish which inhabited them" (1987: 14). Kenin-Lopsan (1987: 14-6) also notes that some Tuvan shamans took their powers from Sky Spirits (azalaar), though he does not mention the names cited by Bair. We have not been able to find a reference elsewhere to the Ustugunun Xoor Albys.

However, the general theme of 'possession' by harmful spirits (albys) of the opposite sex is mentioned by Kenin-Lopsan (1987), Taube (1984), and Vainshtein (1984). Kenin-Lopsan writes that an albys would turn itself into a woman if it met with a man, and into a man if it met with a woman. Certain shamans took their power from descent-lines of albys spirits. For example, a shaman called Kuular Togdugash lived at Syg-Bazhy near the mouth of the Ayangata River in Barun-Xemchik region. He said about himself, "I am a shaman from the lineage of albys. I was going along the pebbles where a dried-up river had flowed. Suddenly, there came towards me two beautiful girls and somehow I found myself between them. I felt that I was lying in the embrace of the girls, who were fast asleep. And so all three of us slept on the pebbly shore. When we woke up, the girls took me to the high ravine of Sug-Bazhy. There I found a large camp in which a whole group of albys were living. They were making tea, which had a very yellow colour. Each albys milked her own breast into the tea, breasts so long that they could be thrown over their shoulders, and we drank the tea. Then the two girls took me to the high sandy river bank of Elezin-Charyk. I saw how each albys again milked her breasts into the tea, and again we drank it in a friendly fashion. Then the two beauties took me to the curving bank of Ulug-Uzuk. Stopping there, they milked their breasts, which were so long they could be thrown over their shoulders. Here they made tea and we drank it. I said good-bye to the beauties and returned home. After that they sometimes came to our camp, but only I could see them;

ordinary people could not. I armed myself with shaman's attributes and started to shamanize. No-one taught me how to sing the shaman's song because I come from the lineage of albys" (1987: 19). Vainshtein (1984: 355) notes that albys (albis) penetrated human beings, often through sexual intercourse, making the possessed person mad. This mental derangement was called albystar, and Vainshtein mentions that other spirits, called aza (mentioned by Bair), and buk (puk) also possessed people and caused illness. While the authors were in Mugur-Aksy village in 1988 we came across an empty house: it was said that someone had died there and that the house was now the haunt of a buk.

We also read in Kenin-Lopsan how Tuvan shamans made images of the illnesses (i.e. the spirits) which attacked their patients (aarygnyn chuuluzun). These were made from paper cut-outs attached to a board, to which were tied strips of vari-coloured cloth. The food for the spirits mentioned by Bair was called ogaalgu according to Kenin-Lopsan. Assistants of the shaman took these items and made a circle three times round a smoke-burner (sang salyry) and then took the food, the smoke-burner and the model outside to a place designated by the shaman. It was thought that the spirits of the illness would willingly follow, and thus quit the patient, because they would be attracted by the smell of the food. Kenin-Lopsan does not mention the shooting of a gun, but he does add a detail absent from Bair's account, the libation of the patient, the food and the model with sacred water (arzhaan) before the latter were taken out of the yurt (1987: 23-4). Vainstein provides an account of a Tuva shaman's curing ritual from the 1960s in which the evil spirit is shot at with 'iron arrows' (1984: 359).

The ydik (idiq), mentioned by Bair, were animals - almost always domesticated animals - which had been consecrated to a spirit. This is known from all over Inner Asia, but it is interesting that in Tuva the ritual could be combined with exorcism. Vainshtein cites an example of the consecration of a horse for the purpose of curing in Western Tuva (1984: 360-1). The shaman told the family which horse to choose. It could be a gelding of any age, not too old, but it had to be of a specified colour. The ritual was performed at night. A young male member of the sick man's family had to bring the horse to the yurt and push its head through the door. The sick man had to touch the horse. Simultaneously, the shaman appealed to the horse to take upon itself all the evil spirits possessing the patient. The consecrated horse was decorated with ribbons tied to the bit, the mane and the tail. Later, when the bit was taken off, the horse was let go to join the herd, and after that only men, and preferably the owner, could ride it. Such a horse should not be butchered but should be allowed to die of old age, whereupon it was given special death rites. Its head, skin and legs were interred

on a platform, or its skull was hung on a tree. The authors of this article saw one such horse's skull raised on a post near a pen for yaks in Mongun Taiga (this was in a region with no trees). Vainshtein notes that if the patient had no horse to dedicate he could, with the shaman's permission, substitute a wooden figurine. This model was regarded as an ceren (this term, like the Mongolian onggon, was used both for a spirit and a material vessel for a spirit) and it was kept in the yurt (1984: 361). Eerens seem to have been regarded as primarily helpful spirits, which aided the shaman and patients in expelling evil spirits of similar species to themselves. The largest group of eerens were zoomorphic (snake, bear, crow, hare, sable, swan, cuckoo, etc.) and there were also anthropomorphic cerens, often the ancestors of the shaman (for a detailed discussion of Tuvan cerens see Vainshtein (1978)). We have not been able to find a reference in the literature to the chugluch eeren mentioned by Bair. The olchei chayaanchi spirit which Bair refers to must be equivalent to the Mongolian 'zayaachi' ('destiny' + olzei 'auspiciousness', 'luck'), deity of luck and protector of children and herds (though Vainshtein rightly warns that spirits with similar names are often found to have quite different functions in various regions of Inner Asia, 1978: 464n).

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Marina: Tell us about the person you were talking about before.

Bair: In Karga there lived a man called Chydyn-ool. He was a shaman. They say he was a great shaman. He was both a shaman and a lama, they say, and when he was acting as a shaman he shamanized from a spirit (albys) called Ustugunun Xoor ('Highest Divider'). Those whose shamanic origin was from the Highest Divider Spirit as a rule shamanized against the albys spirits. It happened that people round here in Tuva suffered from spirit attacks giving rise to mental illnesses. For example, a woman would start to have an affair with a handsome man, or a man would start to have an affair with a wondrously beautiful woman. That's what happened. These pairs could not be separated from one another; there was no power which could divide them from each other. In these cases only the Highest Divider Spirit was powerful enough to help. They made a model figure of a woman riding on a deer and put it down near the hearth in the tent³. The woman and the deer were dark blue in colour. Nearby they placed food and the rib of a fat sheep. In a big cauldron they put salt, taken from a lake, and they gripped the cauldron with tongs. Then the shaman shamanized. When he asked [the patient] what is the name of the spirit making you ill,

³ The figure of the woman on the deer was a representation of the albys.

[the patient] did not reply. Then the shaman took a whip and started to beat the mad person. He [the patient] could not hold out and shouted, "Lover master!", and began to cry and groan loudly. Then they took the things prepared earlier [the figure of the woman and deer] and threw them in the fire, and the fire flared up. Then the mad person took the fiery flaming figure of a woman sitting on a deer and the food, and he ran outside and made three circles [round the yurt]. The shaman fired a shot after him [with a gun]. After this, the mad person came to himself and could talk about the whole thing himself. Sometimes the mad person did not immediately come round.

My father was a lama (xeling, Mong. gelyun)⁴. Yes, he was a lama. He fell ill with a mental illness (tenek aary) when we were living near Kok-kol ('blue lake'). He had the oppressive idea that he was going to die soon. One day he started to allocate all his things to people. He started with his dog. He asked for her to be given to a man called Karji. When I took her to him, Karji asked me to stop all this [in case he fell ill too]. Then on the next day we invited a shaman over [to help]. Before the shaman came my father shrieked and was in a panic, and all the time went on about how he was going to die, he would throw himself in water, he would run away somewhere, or jump into a fire. The shaman arrived and spent the night with us. He [the shaman] made us sleep for the night near the door, in such a way that he [my father] would have to go past us to get out. In the morning the shaman collected firewood. And my father read a sacred book. During the day they prepared everything necessary, and the sculpted a figure of a woman on a deer. When the sun went down, the shaman started to shamanize. He said, "You came here where you had no business coming, you went to places where should should not have gone. Now go back to your home settlement (aal)⁵." Then the shaman asked, "What is the name of your spirit?" My father said, "I don't know". "It's Chashang Xuu⁶", said the shaman. "Chashang Xuu is what they call it". That's how it was. At this point, one man took the figure on the deer, another took all the other things, and a third threw it all on the fire. My father ran round three times; the shaman shot at him with his weapon. That's all. Then my father returned and people talked with him. They asked him, "What happened to you?" He said, "When I was nomadising along Eldig Xem river, I heard the sounds of a mouth-harp (xomus), and after that my heart changed. It sounded as though outside someone was singing, but when I went outside there was no-one there. I went back into the yurt, and again I heard the singing. I thought everyone hated me. It seemed,

⁴ There were three grades of lama in Tuva, xuvrag (the most junior), kechil, and xeling. The xeling was allowed to teach others, although the title xeling does not indicate that he had a Buddhist degree in learning (Marina Mongush).

⁵ Presumably these words were addressed to the spirit causing the illness.

⁶ This name may have been Chashpang Xuu.

they wanted to kill me. Then I decided, it would be better to kill myself, to throw myself off a cliff, than to die at the hands of a human being." The old men talked with my father for a long time. All the night. On the next day they said to my father, "Do not go anywhere for three days," and they told him to wait until the shaman from Karga went away, the one who both shamanized and performed lamaist rituals. During these three days the spirit should leave my father. After three days, while we were working with the lambs, there arose the smells of gopher (*R.suslik*) and marmot. They said that now the spirit would leave my father. They told us to shout, "Chirik albys, Chirik albys!" ['Half-toothless spirit, half-toothless spirit!]. And we started to shout, "Chirik albys, chirik albys!".⁷

A person could shamanize from three sources. First, from Ustugunun Xoor Albys (Highest Divider Spirit), then from Ustugunun Tos Deerning Xam (Highest Empty-Sky Shaman), and then from Chor Sugnung Xam (Earth Water Shaman) and Chovog Xuurnung Xam (? Shaman). These are the three kinds, even four kinds. People counted Highest Divider Spirit and Highest Empty-Sky Shaman as good spirits, but Earth Water Shaman and Chovog Xuurnung Shaman were bad spirits, they say. That is all I can tell you about the history of lamas and shamans.

Marina: Tell us about the strange, snotty Mongolian lama.

Bair: About the lama? He was a Mongol. He heard about the wonderful and beautiful land of Tuva. He took two walking sticks and set out [from Mongolia] and went on foot, taking a year on the journey. For provisions on the road he took powdered flour (*dalgan*). As he was going along a wolf began to follow him and he gave it some flour. The wolf ate it. He gave it some more. When only the last portion of flour was left, he took it and poured it into a paper gun and threw it down. The wolf grabbed it and suddenly there was a loud explosion. Then everything was quiet. Then on the next day he found a large rock and he spent the whole night on it. In the morning he set out again and he saw a yurt in the steppe. This was a large spacious Xalx [i.e. Mongol] yurt.

He set out further and on the way he met a small girl. He wanted to find out if this was a real little girl, or whether it was an *aza* [a spirit], and he threw a handful of earth at her. She started to cry. He decided that she was a real little girl, and he went on further. But the little girl went on crying and followed after him. On she went,

⁷ Presumably the spirit smelled of gopher and marmot. The insulting shouting by the children was to frighten off the spirit.

following him. What should he do about her? He took her on his back. He went across the steppe and then he came to a camp (aal). Round the camp there were horsemen, some of them tying up their horses. When he entered the camp, the horsemen said that this was the little girl who had been lost. Everyone had been looking for her. The people gave the Mongolian lama food and a good horse and sent him further on his way. He was very strange, almost as if he was mad. "I don't know what to do with a horse," he said. When they gave him a horse he never rode it. He just took it by the leading-rein and left it wherever it stopped. That's what he was like. He lived in Shigetei⁸. He performed the xurum [Mong. gurim] ritual in Dorbot camps in Mongolia. He brought with him, tied behind the saddle, a load of saddle-bags and journey-bags with some sacred books. He never knew what happened to the horse. He asked his wife, when he returned, "Where are my things tied up in the bags?" "How should I know?" replied his wife. On the next day he searched for the lost things and found them at the place called Utkuulak.

At Karga there was an ovaa [sacred cairn] called Suglug. In the 1930s they forbade lamas and shamans to perform ceremonies at Suglug-ovaa. But later they allowed shamans to shamanize again and lamas to conduct their lamaist rituals. And he [the Mongol lama] began to practice his lamaism again. He settled this time at Kuskun-Dorgun. There he tied up his horse, as it were, but then he discovered that it had gone. He had hold of the horse's bridle, but he was so strange that he did not notice that there was no horse, only a bridle. Then he asked his wife, "Where is my horse?" "How should I know?" she replied. On the next day they found his horse. That's the kind of idiot he was. When he went into a yurt they always gave him flour-paste (dalgan). He always kneaded it. He used to stare fixedly at a girl while kneading the flour-paste in his bowl. Then he said to her, "Take it". However many people there were in the yurt, he gave them all flour-paste. His snot all this time ran and ran, and he wiped it off like this (on the ground). He divided up the flour in equal portions for each person. That how strange a man he was, that weird lama. He shamanized and he was a lama, then he stopped shamanizing.

Once he came to this place. Once upon a time a Mongol Great Lama (ulug xeling) used to live here. The descendants of that Ulug Xeling still live here. The Chigit family and Badaraa are his descendants. So this strange person came to Ulug Xeling, and my father was there at the time. He arrived with a triangular drum (dungur). That Ulug Xeling made him get rid of the drum. Ulug Xeling said to him, "Here in Tuva you will get nowhere with that drum of your. It would be better if you had sacred

⁸ This place is in Mongun-Taiga and the name means 'with ears'.

books on your head. " and he ordered him to throw his drum in the river. And he threw away his drum. And it rolled and rolled down the river. That's the sort of man he was, sort of stupid and sort of mad. During the xurum ritual he used to cut his mouth and tongue with a knife. He cut till the blood flowed and poured out.

There was a lama-shaman called Cheek-Sargan who went to visit Yellow (Saryg) Shaman⁹. This was at Kara-Xol¹⁰. He entered his yurt, and put down the [sacred Buddhist] book he had been carrying under his arm on top of the shaman's drum. Yellow Shaman grabbed the drum and threw off the book. "Get out of my yurt, you black wandering lama (kara badarchi). How dare you put your stinking book on my drum?", he said. The other took his book and went into a neighbouring yurt. They said to him, "Be careful, he is a very dangerous shaman". Soon they heard the sound of that shaman's drum. All those present said that it was urgently necessary to bring water. They brought some water and put hot cinders in it. Cheek-Sargan cut his own hands and head with a knife and let the blood fall into the water. Then, when he threw out [made a libation with?] the water the sounds of the drum stopped. This ritual is called shyjip (serji) orgup. Later, when everyone in the yurt had gone to sleep, someone rode up on horseback and asked for Cheek. "Oh teacher (bakshi), something has happened to our Yellow Shaman, come and help!" "I won't go", he replied, "He drove me out of his yurt". Then a second man arrived and asked him to help, and after that a third man again came and asked him to help. At last, the shaman's wife came and asked for help. When he [Cheek] got to the shaman's place, the teacher saw that he was lying near the hearth, all unconscious. They brushed him down and picked him up. That's what happened. Later the old shaman came to his senses, calmed down, and said, "Teacher, I will not do anything bad again". In one bowl he [the teacher] poured milk,¹¹ and in another he put water, and he dropped hot cinders in that one. He [Cheek] held out this bowl with water and cinders and offered it three times to Yellow Shaman; he did not accept it. But when they held out the bowl with milk to him, he took it with two hands. He drank a little of the milk and gave an oath that he would never do anything bad. That is what they say.

In the 1930s they arrested him (i.e. Cheek Sargan); he was called Ertemnig Lama. They took him to Chadaan town to question him. The prison official asked him, "Why do you write and write all the time?" "You want to kill me," replied the lama, "Let me get on with my own affairs". "Well, all right, you can go", said the other, and let him

⁹ The name 'yellow' here implies that this shaman was influenced by Buddhism. Yellow was the colour associated with the church in Mongolia.

¹⁰ A place in the central region of Tuva, some distance from Mongun Taiga..

¹¹ Milk as a pure substance would act as an antidote to the bad deeds of the shaman.

go home. That's the kind of man he was, that one who was both a shaman and a lama (i.e. Check). I did not see him so often. I only saw how he cut his mouth and tongue with a knife, and then poured the blood on the xurum. Then, when you looked, it was as though nothing had happened to those places he had cut.

Marina: Tell us about the ydyk (consecrated animals).

Bair: The ydyks were of many different types. There used to be ydyks in the past. I personally never saw them, but I can tell you about them¹². In the past, the Elchirge Ydyk was a black goat, the skins of black male and female goats were made ydyks¹³.

Marina: Wait a moment. Tell us some more about ydyks.

Bair: The ydyk of fire was a reddish and white he-goat. They used to worship the fire (ot dagyyr). The shaman did the dagyyr ritual and a lama could also do it. There was also a kind of domestic idol, which was mainly kept only inside the yurt - they were called nugluch chuglug eeren and olchei chaiaanchy. They were eeren for children. The ydyk of these eeren was a dog. Only a shaman could do this ritual, and lamas were not concerned with it. There also was the horse disease (a't aary) ydyk. Only some people kept them. The ydyk of the horse disease was a black horse. And then some people had the Seven Gods (dolaan burxan) ydyk.¹⁴ This ydyk could not be a communal one. It took the form of a kara irt (black ?). That was the Seven Gods ydyk. Then there was shamans' ydyks and lamas' ydyks. The lamas' ydyks were called burxan ydyk, and they were horses of various colours or a white ox with red ears. The white ox with red ears was called Sagaan Ovgon Ydyk (Mong. White Old Man) ydyk.¹⁵ Yes, there were those ydyks. The shamans' ydyks were consecrated horses of various colours.¹⁶ That is what happened. People used to consecrate horses, sheep, and goats, mostly those with yellow eyes. The ydyk of the fire could be a she-goat. Sometimes they consecrated an ydyk to water. They did the ritual (dagyr) at the source of the water, and then consecrated a blue he-goat as the ydyk, and then let it go free. That he-goat could join up with any flock. They consecrated one he-goat as the ydyk at the water's source and let it go free. That's all.

¹² Almost certainly it was untrue that Bair had never seen them. In Tuva in 1988 people were hesitant to talk about religious practices, which were still disapproved of by the authorities.

¹³ According to Marina the word Elchirge has no meaning. The spirit to whom the black goat was consecrated was a spirit which brought death.

¹⁴ The constellation Ursa Major, which was worshipped also by the Mongols.

¹⁵ The White Old Man was widely worshipped throughout the Mongol region as part of the popular religious practices associated with Lamaism.

¹⁶ The Tuvian text gives the colours of these horses, but we have been unable to translate them.

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