Review

Reviewed Work(s): Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge and Power among the Daur Mongols by Caroline Humphrey and Urgun Onon

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has nothing to do with neoclassical theory and everything to do with bureaucratic lobbies and nostalgia for *khadi* cloth.

Another vital distinction is that just because central governments often make policy without regard to either the local populations or to the environment (as illustrated by Khojamakhmad Umarov’s essay on the handling of the population explosion in Tajikistan), it does not follow that local populations are in practice always benign in their use of the environment. The late Graham Clark illustrates this point in a valuable essay on “Environmental Sustainability, Development and Planning in Tibet.” Making government decisions based on romantic generalizations about “traditional” ways such as are presented in Batjargal’s essay or Alicia Campi’s piece on “Amalgamating the Free Market and Traditional Nomadic Society,” however benign these generalizations may seem, will likely generate ineffective policies.

Finally, the unasked question in most of these essays is: who decides? Again and again recommendations are made to fund this, limit that, or apply that strategy (passive voices abound). Lip-service is given to listening to local populations; Zane Smith’s consultation process on pp. 120–23 recalls the endless meetings under Mao’s slogan of “from the people, to the people.” In the end, of course, international aid organizations and government-funded NGOs determine priorities. Three of the essays, Zane Smith’s on the “Lake Hovsgol-Selenge River Project,” Frank Roseby on the “China-Australia Sheep Project, Xinjiang,” and that of Mahesh Banskota on “Promoting Integrated Mountain Development,” are little more than puff-pieces for the authors’ own organizations; ironically, the “China-Australia Sheep Project” closed down last year without having released a single improved sheep.

Of course the environmental problems of Central and Inner Asia are in places quite serious, as Aliya Beisenova demonstrates for Kazakstan, and Wang Tao shows for the grasslands of China. On the evidence of this volume, however, the “sustainable development” rhetoric of the CoDoCA is not a powerful new way of envisioning development, but a mixture of self-interested hype and a common-sense awareness that any kind of development has costs.

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*Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge and Power among the Daur Mongols.*  
By **Caroline Humphrey** with **Urgunge Onon**. Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. xiv, 396 pp. $80.00 (cloth); $24.95 (paper).

Anyone who might have seen Kurosawa’s celebrated film “Dersu Uzala” is unlikely to forget the sensitive portrayal of a Siberian hunter—a Buryat and a shaman perhaps—who embodies that unique combination of respect for nature and the sense of awe towards the foreboding dangers of the surrounding taiga. Kurosawa presents Dersu with his concern for all living creatures, as well as his respect for the mysterious forces in nature that affect them. Dersu speaks of the special affinity between humans and animals, even tigers, in contrast to the heedless and matter-of-fact behavior of the Russian crew of military topographers penetrating into the vastness of Siberia for the first time. Similarly Caroline Humphrey and Urgunge Onon have presented us with a detailed and evocative account of the thinking of the peoples of Inner Asia.
with respect to human relations, nature, and those unpredictable forces affecting human existence as represented by the idea of "shamanism."

The venture attempted by Humphrey and Urgunge is extremely ambitious: to explain and render intimately comprehensible the world view first of the Daur Mongols in Manchuria (Urgunge's people), but also, second, to throw light upon the entire complex of what has been called "shamanism" in Inner Asia. Furthermore, Humphrey claims to present the materials from diverse points of view: she writes in her own terms, but has constant reference to her encounter with Urgunge. She also presents the views of previous ethnographers, Russians and others, as well as extensive materials from published historical sources in many languages.

The work is the outcome of long conversations with Urgunge in the years 1987–88. It is enriched by a field trip in Manchuria in the summer of 1988. It is all brought together with the wide ranging and admirable scholarship of Humphrey who is clearly well in control of the western, Russian, Mongolian, and Daur sources. Some Japanese and Chinese sources are also noted. There is full reference to earlier travelers and other authors who have been captivated by this vast region and its peoples.

The authors themselves form an unusual team: Humphrey, Reader in Anthropology at Cambridge University, has been working on this region, the Mongols, and the Buryat with excellent writings to her credit. Urgunge Onon, also at Cambridge, is a Daur Mongol who was born in a small village in a Manchu military settlement in 1919. He was captured as a child by bandits and held for ransom. He was then involved in the politics of Manchuria as a follower of Prince De, a descendant of Chinggis Khan. After a stint at Japanese universities during the war in 1942, he came to the U.S. with the legendary Owen Latimore to teach Mongolian at Johns Hopkins, and then, when Latimore was accused of being a communist, left with him for England. He has been living in England since, and has only returned to Mongolia (but not to his region in Manchuria) in 1966. So, Humphrey notes that the views presented in this work are a combination of the recollections of Urgunge from his native village many years ago, augmented by her own considerable scholarship on Inner Asia, as well as by her first-hand impressions on her field-work visit to the villages and relatives of Urgunge whom she was able to track down on her trip to Inner Mongolia. It all adds up to a very unusual and extremely well-documented account of the beliefs and rituals surrounding the concept of "shamanism."

In the earlier sections of the work we are provided with a discussion of the nature of Inner Asian traditions of shamanism. Humphrey wants to take us beyond the well-known work of Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaiic Techniques of Ecstasy*, by providing a first-hand account of shaman practices in the villages of the Daur Mongols, then by enlarging the account to describe the usages among many diverse peoples in this vast region, Mongols, Buryats, Tungus, Yakuts, Altaians, and others. Again, in distinction to Eliade, who reifies "shamanism" in evolutionary terms, she is concerned to define the social conditions, the political exigencies, and indeed the psychological contexts in which the thoughts of the local people turn towards the different manifestations of shamanist practice. She notes that we must not essentialize a particular unchanging definition of what has been called "shamanism" in western sources, but that at a deeper level shamanism is a way of thinking about human relations and nature in the particular cultural, historical moment and environmental context in which people find themselves.

The authors describe the extraordinary changes which have greatly dislocated these unsuspecting populations in Inner Asia. Since the nineteenth century the major upheavals of this century have taken place around and among them. They have had
to cope with the Tsarist invasion, the Russo-Japanese wars, the fall of the Manchu empire in 1911, the Russian revolution, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the Nationalists and Communists in China; these events beyond the control of local peoples are of such magnitude that any one of them would suffice for a lifetime of worry. The book is particularly valuable in the way it describes the cultural and psychological reactions of the inhabitants to these events in the most intimate terms. Indeed it is the way these peoples have internalized the problems with which they are faced and their manner of responding to such challenges in spiritual terms (i.e., “shamanism”) that is the main thrust of the work. Some of the most brilliant and moving passages indicate the development of new cults and the reactions of people to these momentous events taking place outside their ability to control them. Humphrey describes the attempt of a particular “shaman,” for instance, to resist the terrible developments that is destroying their ancient and balanced way of life. He tries to resist the railroad—which also brings the armies—opening inroads into their country; after elaborate ritual preparations, this takes the form of a shamanic attack on the monster Japanese locomotive that is troubling them (p. 337).

The Russian and Chinese authorities as well as the Buddhists had always treated the rituals of shamans as a form of primitive superstition which had to be suppressed. It was referred to as the “black faith,” as opposed to the “yellow faith” of the Lamaists. In China, Daur shamans were prevented from practicing and their spirit-figures were burnt. In a striking passage, Humphrey tells of the villagers being in a quandary: “Would it not be possible for you to send a report to Chairman Mao and ask him to order the spirits not to haunt us, not to make us ill? If you could do that, then we would have no need to employ the shamans” (p. 9).

The work aims to describe not only the particular manifestations of these cults and rituals among the Daur, Mongol, Buryat, Yakut, Tungus, and Altai but also to argue for a deeper common element in the attitudes to the self and the powers outside the self. The discussion of “Tengri” (Lord of Heaven, Mandate of Heaven, Sky) and relations to this higher “power” occupy some important passages. Also important are the discussions of male and female shamans in Daur society. These are presented in contradistinction to other important local traditions as the cult of “Tenger” (Daur), as well as the traditions of Buddhism, Lamaism. The point is made that shamanist attitudes are extremely individualistic, but nourished by clan and community ties. These involve beliefs in mysterious occult powers beyond ordinary consciousness. There are fears, anxieties, and threats both to the community and to the individual which are somehow objectified by spirits, then managed and diverted by shamanic ritual.

Humphrey and Urgunge cut through the great variety of experiences to come to conclusions that are startlingly “existentialist.” Merleau-Ponty is mentioned. Humphrey writes of the inner world of the self and its “externalization” in the form of fears, anxieties, rituals, objects, and also the “internalization” of “exterior” events, the great unknown beyond the community and the sky. Jean-Paul Sartre would have approved of their formulation of “shamanism” as a thoroughly contemporary form of psychology and morality. One of their important arguments is that, unlike Buddhism, Lamaism, and Communism, there are no privileged persons before whom the individual has to “kow-tow.” They claim that shamanism in this sense is not a restricting but liberating attitude for the individual spirit.

It is in the nature of shamanism that practices in the vast spaces from western Central Asia to Manchuria, and among very diverse populations, appear to have some deeper unity. The authors represent this as the respect for nature, the care for the
“powers” outside individual control, the spiritual attitude to the self and to the superior power of “tengger,” “the sky above.” This unity is not so surprising when we recall the work of Georges Dumezil concerning the ancient connections between Indo-Aryan cultures from Rome to India. So this special attention to the spiritual quest of the individual, the sacredness which attaches to exceptional personages as shamans, seems like a cultural form that is common to Central and Inner Asian cultures. Indeed, there is much here that appears similar to some of the “sufi” sects, which themselves have originated in Central Asia, such as the “whirling dervishes” of the mystic poet Rumi (especially their slow turning movement around an axis known as sama). One is reminded of the work of F. Koprulu, in the 1930s, who claimed that there were direct connections between ancient shamanic practices and some of the practices of “sufi” brotherhoods in central and western Asia.

This remarkable study presents complex arguments and detailed materials from a vast geographical and cultural dimension with recourse to many different voices. The willingness to confront complexity does present difficulties. Many authors, travelers, and informants come before the reader in quick succession. Although we are in the hands of an excellent scholar-guide in this barely charted region, the argument gives at times a kaleidoscopic impression. What is evidently second nature to the authors who happily regale us with accounts from Chinese, Russian, Mongolian, and other sources from the 1890s to this day—interspersed with conversations, transcriptions from tape recorded sessions in Manchuria, as well as direct commentaries from a Daur Mongol himself, Urgunge, in King’s College, Cambridge, England—makes for challenges for the reader. Even so, such shortcomings do not obscure the major contribution to the ethnography of Inner Asia.

Humphrey wants to leave us with the idea that those original, supposedly closed, traditional, crystalline cultures with definable boundaries so beloved of earlier generations of anthropologists have now given way to “cultures” interpenetrating each other. Just as Urgunge lives with his ideas and memories of ancient “shamanism” in Cambridge, and has evidently influenced a major scholar in profound ways, similarly other cultures, too, must be presented in their complexity as ideas (“ethnoscapes”?) in the minds of mobile individuals. People are no longer stuck to a “culture” in a time and place like Malinowski’s Trobrianders, but are in contact. Their ideas cross “boundaries” and evolve through dialogues with others. These are large theoretical claims. Although Caroline Humphrey is pointing to very important processes, the fact that there still are uniquely Daur-speaking and Daur-feeling communities and individuals both in Manchuria and Cambridge indicates that there is another reality of the “cultural spirit” that Hegel and Herder were warning us about. The challenge for anthropology is to present both the integrative and disintegrative aspects of “culture” in a realistic manner. There is little doubt that this sophisticated work of devoted scholarship with its many moving histories will serve as an important marker on that path. There is an excellent bibliography and valuable pictures.

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