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Dancing and swinging of who, when and why? Deciphering two murky lines of Buryat shamanic poetry

Mátyás Balogh

Department for Mongolian and Inner-Asian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

Buryat shamanic poetry is a difficult genre to understand and to translate. Its lyrics can be challenging to understand even for native speakers, for it is believed that shamans’ spirits speak and prefer to be spoken to in a language characterized by riddles and roundabout phrases. Attendees of shamanic rituals barely understand this highly elevated language. Therefore, an assistant, i.e. a person familiar with the spirits’ language acts as an interpreter during the ritual. No wonder that when Buryat shamanic poetry is translated to another language for scholarly purposes, the result contains a considerable amount of guesswork, and lines that do not seem to fit well in the entire corpus. In the present paper based on the explanations given by a shaman’s assistant, I am going to shed more light on two lines that frequently recur in shamanic incantations and are crucial to our understanding of Buryat shamanic practice.

Introduction

In the early 1990s two Mongolian linguist-folklorists, G. Gantogtokh and J. Coloo conducted a series of fieldwork research on the shamanic traditions that had survived in Northeast Mongolia. They videotaped a consecration ritual (šanar-šandruu) and recorded the invocations, possibly the entire repertoire of a prominent shaman of the region, Ch. Ceren. In 1998 Gantogtokh and Coloo cooperating with the renowned Hungarian mongolist, G. Kara published the invocations in the Mongolian academic journal, Literature Studies. Almost a decade later, in 2007 Coloo republished the collection in his monograph, The songs of the thirteen lords of the North. The text was translated by Kara, and despite the fact that Gantogtokh is a Buryat from Dornod province as well as an expert on Buryat shamanism, some parts of the translation do not seem to match with the original. What is missing for a more accurate translation is I think the ritual context. In order to fully grasp the meaning of the lines of these shamanic invocations one has to have been present during the very ritual in which the invocations were performed. In 2004–05 I had the chance to attend and videotape another Buryat shamanic ritual, performed by shamaness Altanceceg, in which almost the same invocations were sung. In these, I noticed two frequently recurring lines that are...
also found in Ceren’s invocations, and when I inquired about their meaning, Altanceceg and her assistant’s interpretation differed considerably from Kara’s translation. The lines recur in slightly different forms in both invocations, but in all instances are built around two Buryat expressions: yüheneingee yürgelge and naimanaingaa nagalga. What precede and what follow these in the texts, give little context for a good understanding and accurate translation. On the other hand, the rituals I had the fortune to witness and the performers’ explanations have shed light not only on these two murky lines, but also on the whole ritual.

(1) Shaman Ceren’s invocations

The mentioned expressions are found in four of Ceren’s invocations (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4). The invocation of Builaan the Swift (1.1, Builaan türgenei duudlaaga) contains it twice (1.1a, 1.1b).

1.1a. The first instance is:

\[
yüheneingee yürgelgenle
naimanaingaa naigalganla bolba geže
\]

Kara’s translation:

(it is my) Nine (fellows’) rock and
(it is my) eight (peoples’) sway

The first words of the two lines, yüheneinge and naimanaingaa are easy to understand. Both are numerals, yühen means nine, naiman means eight, and both have the same suffixes -AingAA (GEN+REFL.) attached. The following words in each line, yürgelgen and naigalgan are translated by Kara as ‘rock’ and ‘sway’, respectively, and by inserting (fellows) and (people) he assumes that the rocking and swaying (dancing?) is performed by some unmentioned individuals. At this point, we can think of spirits being invoked by the shaman (the shaman’s fellows) or possibly people participating in the ritual.

1.1b. The next instance shed a little more light on the ritual context but does not seriously challenge Kara’s first interpretation.

\[
yüheneingee yürgelgeniiyi
naimanaingaa naigarganiiyiuraadaža
aadar sagaan seržemiiyi
anduul ügüi barigtii
\]

Kara’s translation:

Do not miss to take my showery white libation
I call for the rumbling of my Nine (Fellows)
and for the swinging of my eight (Fellows)

In this verse yürgelgen is translated as rumbling instead of ‘rock’ and naigargan (this time with an r) is translated as swinging instead of ‘sway’. The two words in the Buryat original are in the accusative case and followed by the verb uraada- ‘to call’. According to Kara’s translation we cannot but imagine a festivity-like ritual to which the shaman invites his nine/eight ‘fellows’ (either spirit or human guests) and offers them libation, more literally liquor (seržem).
1.2 In another of Ceren’s invocations the two expressions in question (yühéni yürgelen and naimanai naigalgan) are again in the accusative and is said to be done or performed (xe-) by the shaman:

Song calling for the protecting spirit of Damdindorlig (Damdindorlig hax’uuhanai durdlaga)

amar mende huuxin tülöö geže
yühéningee yürgeleniinyi
naimanaingaa naigalganiinyi
xeżeuraadlagiinyi xebeb

Kara’s translation:

I made (this) call performing
the swing of my Nine (Fellows)
and the sway of my Eight (Fellows)
in order to live safe and sound.

1.3 The third instance is found in the invocation of another patron-spirit, called Manžalai (Manžalain duudлага). Here the numerals appear in duplicated forms (yühe yühen ‘nine nine’ and naima naiman ‘eight eight’) and with the same -dAA suffix (DAT/LOC+REFL.) attached to the second numeral in each line. These duplications of the numerals are followed by causative verbs (yür’üül- naigulu-) that have the same yür- and naig- stems as the corresponding nouns (yürgelge and nai.galga) in our previous examples. Thus yür’üül- and naigulu- must mean ‘to make something/somebody rock or rumble and swing or sway’. The -žA (IMPERF) verbal ending here corresponds to the English -ing. The second and fourth lines in the example both have the expression:

šanariim ugtuulhan
consecration-GEN-FIRST.PSN.POSS receive-CAUS.PST
‘Made/let me receive my consecration’

yühe yühendee yür’üülže
yühen šanariim ugtuulhan
naima naimandaa naiguulža
naiman šanariim ugtuulhan

Kara’s translation:

Rocking nine times nine (you are)
encountered by my ninefold šanar
Swaying eight times eight (you are)
encountered by my eightfold šanar

Kara’s insertion (you are) at the end of the first and third lines can only be understood as the shaman’s addressing of the spirit being invoked, in this case Manžalai. Thus, the stanza’s meaning according to Kara’s translation could be summed up as follows: The patron-spirit, Manžalai has witnessed or taken part in the shaman’s consecrations of which he had eight and nine.

1.4 The fourth and last instance is found in the invocation of the ancestral spirit called Tühe the Crippled (Taxir Tühe garbalin duudлага). This instance is similar to the previous one in that it is also made up of a pair of verbal expressions, but differs from it in that the two
numerals (yühen and naiman) are in the accusative (-iiye). The literal translation of the two lines here would be 'I make the nine rock/rumble, I make the eight swing/sway.'

on želdee mende hain  
yabaxiin tülöö geže  
enę yüheniiye yuryüüleneb  
naimangiiyi naiguulnab  
zayaa guža zalbirnab daa  
ǘrööl guža ügelneb daa

Kara’s translation:

I rock this ninefold (sacri- fices)  
I sway (this) eightfold (sacri- fices)  
I pray for (good) fate  
I ask for blessing

It is confusing that according to Kara here the numerals do not refer to participants (either spirit or human) or to dance moves (1.3) but to sacrifices. We are completely left to our own imagination in trying to understand what the rocking of ninefold sacrifices and the swaying of eightfold sacrifices could actually mean.

To sum up, according to Kara’s translation the numerals yühen and naiman when preceding the nouns yürgelgen and nagalgan or the verbs yür’üül- and naiguul- can refer to the number of participants (most probably the invited spirits), dance moves and of sacrifices (possibly offerings made to the invoked spirits).

Altanceceg and her assistant Namsrai’s ritual and their explanation of the ritual’s purpose and timing allows us to prepare a more accurate translation of the problematic expressions and to understand what goes on during such a ritual.

(2) Altanceceg’s ritual

Altanceceg’s ritual was held in an office-room in Ulaanbaatar in January 2005 (according to the traditional Mongolian calendar, on the 19th day of the 12th month in the year of the iron blue monkey.) Two or three of Altanceceg’s apprentices as well as her husband, her assistant (xelmerše) Namsrai and myself attended the event. Altanceceg sung the invocations until she got possessed by a spirit, who then was believed to speak through her mouth. Altanceceg got possessed by multiple spirits in succession during the ritual. It was Namsrai’s duty to greet the spirits, offer them vodka, milk or tobacco and to converse with them. These conversations contain expressions that provide parallel material for Ceren’s invocations. For I have already described Altanceceg’s whole ritual in detail, this time I will concentrate only on those parts of it that are related to the deciphering of our expressions in question. It has to be noted that Namsrai’s Buryat is considerably influenced by the Halh dialect on which Mongolia’s official language is based. He often uses forms that are a mixture of the two dialects, and also uses the Buryat and Halh variants of certain words interchangeably. The first time our expression under examination naimanai nagalga, yühenei yürgelge occurred, was when Altanceceg got possessed by her first (unknown by name) spirit. When Namsrai noticed this, he immediately started talking to the spirit, telling him/her about the ritual and its circumstances. He said:
2.1 Xar haixan üdertöö naima naimanai nagalgiiye yühe yühenei yürgölgiiye xiiż bainabd’i daa.
Translation: On this beautiful black day, we are doing the naima naimanai nagalga and the yühenei yürgölgö.

The spirit then said s/he was happy to be invited, drank a cup of vodka that Namsrai offered and left the scene. Altanceceg seemed to gain her consciousness back for a while. After this, other spirits came to possess Altanceceg in a row. Each time Namsrai greeted them in similar fashion, by introducing the scene, the ritual and the participants. His introduction to the ritual did not vary much throughout the course of the event. Some examples from his greeting words:

2.2 Naima naimnii nagalga
Yühö naimanai yürgölgö daa!
Translation: (This is the) Naima naimnii nagalga and the Yühö naimanai yürgölgö!

2.3 Za ene haixan naim naimnii nagalgaa yühe naimnii yürgölgö šireeteigee zalragtíl!
Translation: Well, this is the nice naim naimnii nagalga and yühe naimnii yürgölgö, please come to your offerings!

2.4 Naim namanii nagalga yühö naimnaii yürgölgö xadaa!
Translation: (This is the) Naim namanii nagalga and the Yühö naimanaii yürgölgö!

At one point, when the last possession was taking place Namsrai turned to my camcorder and explained the event to me:

2.5 Nairlaga gesen üg. Nairlaz baigaa gesen üg.
Translation: It means party. It means having a party.

Then he turned back to the table on which the offerings were displayed and said to the departing spirit:

2.6 Xöörögtii daa, dalai hüü barigtii daa!
Translation: Please ascend, take the ocean-milk (large amount of milk)!

After the ritual was over and all the spirits had gone, Namsrai turned to my camcorder once more to sum up the ritual for me:


Translation: Well, this is the end, this is how it ended. It is over. The Yühönei yürgölgö namanai nagalaga, the ritual with a drum, the light ritual, the celebrating-ritual. This was not a problem-solving. Not [about] somebody’s problem. It was well, a naimandaa nagaž Yusöndöö yürgöž leaning against each other’s shoulders, holding each other’s hands and
contributing money and food. It was only a ritual for nagalga, a ritual for amusement. We
were not meant to solve someone’s problem, definitely not! Only she [the shaman] did it for
herself inviting all the ancestral and patron spirits of herself and her disciples here and
having fun with them. The Nagalga Naimnii yusii yurgolgo, leaning against each other’s
shoulders, and contributing money and food . . . in exactly this manner is [conducted] by
Buryats on the 9th, 19th and 29th of the celestial month.

From this last sentence, it becomes clear that the genitive of the numeral yuhen ‘nine’
in the given context refers to the days on which these kinds of rituals are held and not
to the number of spirits or attendees. Buryat numerals such as yuhen (as well as Halh
numerals ending in -n such as yusön for instance) not only stand for a number but also
designate the days of a given month. Yuhen, for example, can mean the ninth day of
a month. Of course the same is true to naiman, apart from standing for a number it can
mean the eighth day of month. Namsrai later explained that the 8th, 18th, and 28th, are
the descending days of ‘white spirits’ (sagan ongodin buulstin udor) and therefore
‘white shamans’ (sagaanii boo) hold their rituals on these three days each lunar month
(tengeriin sar) in order to regale their spirits. On the other hand the 9th, 19th and 29th
are the ‘black spirits’ descending days (xara ongodin buulstin udor), on which ‘black
shamans’ (xariin boo) arrange a feast for their spirits. This also explains why during
greeting the first spirit, Namsrai said ‘on this beautiful black day’ (2.1). The ritual was
held on the 19th day of the 12th lunar month, i.e. a descending day of black spirits.
According to Namsrai almost all ‘black shamans’ including Altanceceg had white
consecrations as well, which makes them ‘black and white shamans’ (xara sagaaniiyi
xabsaran boo).

The words following the numerals nagalga (noun)/naga-(verb) and yurgolgo (noun)/
yurg- (verb) are clearly synonyms and were chosen because they alliterate with the
numerals (na- and yu). Neither of them could I find in dictionaries. The first, nagalga
was translated by Namsrai as nair ‘party, feast, amusement, fun’. Thus, shaman Ceren’s
nai nai ggalga ‘swaying, swinging’ might either be a variant or a mishearing of nagalga.
On the other hand, a mongolist cannot but ponder about the possible common origin of
nagalga, and the word widely used in virtually all varieties of Mongolian, naadam (WM.
nayadum) ‘playing, game, festival, amusement, fun’.

Concerning Kara’s translation of yur gelgen/yurgolgo, as ‘rocking, rumbling’ seems to
be correct. In the Extensive Thesaurus of the Mongolian Language, which is a dictionary
of the Halh variety, the unmistakable equivalents of yur gel gen/yurgolgo (noun) and
yur ge/-yurg- (verb) are found as follows: yergoo ‘trotting, jumping movement of
a horse’, and yergox ‘to trot’. Cheremisov gives yur’yexe as dvigat’sja tolpoi ili gur’boi
‘moving with the crowd or throng’. In Mongolian linguistics it is well documented
that in certain Buryat dialects WM. g develops into y when preceding a palatal
consonant. Thus it is obvious that these words refer to trotting, jumping, or rocking,
rumbling dance moves or dancing in a group of people.

In my earlier publications, I translated these lines as:

The swinging of the ninths
and the swaying of the eighths

But a less literal and more understandable translation could be:
Dancing on the ninths
and swinging on the eighths.

The reason why Namsrai greeted Altanceceg’s spirits by this two-line introduction and why shaman Ceren’s invocations contain these same expressions is because they both wanted to inform the spirits about the character of the event they were going to participate. These lines make a clear and unmistakable statement for the spirits that they were invited to take part in a joyful event as guests, as opposed to a serious problem-solving ceremony.

My cooperation with Altanceceg and Namsrai, among other shamans continued during my stay in Mongolia. They let me attend a number of their rituals, even one which as Namsrai explained was intended to solve a serious problem of a client. This time they did not allow me to make video or audio recordings of the event and did not tell me about the client’s problem. They told me that such rituals are strictly confidential and because of the ‘strong’ spirits involved can be dangerous. Therefore, a shaman would seldom if ever allow an outsider to be present and watch the procedure. Other shamans I worked with openly rejected my appeals to attend their ‘problem-solving rituals’. Altanceceg and Namsrai as well as all the shamans who were either Buryats or disciples of Buryat shamans drew a clear line between the two types of rituals, two which they referred to as xereg xiix or zasal and yüsöngöö xiix. The former is what I call ‘problem-solving rituals’. The term xereg xiix literally means ‘to do (xiix) a matter, or problem (xereg)’ i.e. to solve a problem. The other term, zasal (Bur. zahal) derives from the verb zas- (Bur. zaha-, WM. jasa-) ‘to fix, to repair’ implying that the ritual’s goal is to fix the client’s problem. The name of the other type of rituals yüsöngöö xiix (Bur. Yühengee xeex) come from the phrases in question and denote the type of rituals meant to amuse and entertain the spirits. This type I call ‘spirit-pleasing rituals’. Namsrai later explained in more detail, and other shamans confirmed that though problem-solving rituals were considered dangerous, there were strict rules as to what were not allowed during a ‘spirit-pleasing ritual’. It was prohibited to ask the spirits to solve a problem during these rituals, but it was allowed for a future client to tell a spirit about a problem and agree on the details of a ‘problem-solving ritual’ to be conducted. The mentioned days of each month were reserved for entertaining the spirits, and if a shaman neglected this duty, the spirits would resort to tormenting the shaman with the same adversities s/he had faced before his/her initiation. In order to avoid that the shaman has to be in good terms with his/her spirits, to maintain a good relationship with them, and only this good relationship can ensure the spirits’ willingness to help when asked during a ‘problem-solving ritual’.

Conclusion

The phrases yühenei yürgelge, naimanai nagalga and their varieties are much more than just two lines in a vast body of shamanic poetry. These phrases are the keys that open a door to understanding how Buryat shamans from an emic point of view categorize and think about their rituals and spirits. The yüsöngöö xiix type of small-scale spirit pleasing rituals constitute a crucial part of a Buryat shaman’s practice, yet it remains a neglected or daresay not even recognized type of rituals in the specialized literature. The reason for this is that aside from the shaman and his/her closest entourage (disciples and assistant) nobody is interested to take part in them. These rituals do
not serve the community directly, but without them the shaman would not be able to get the spirits to do what the community requires.

Notes

1. Gantogtokh, Kara, and Coloo, “Buryat Shaman Songs and Rites,” 95–140. The Buryats distinguish between consecrations of black and white shamans. The black shaman’s consecration is called šanar, while the white shaman’s is called šandruu. The ritual during which both black and white shamans are consecrated is often referred to as šanar-šandruu. The term ‘initiation’, which is most often used in the literature, denotes only one aspect of the šanar or šandruu since this ritual is not a single initiation through which candidates can become shamans, but a sequence of rituals by which they can ascend to higher and higher levels of the shamanic hierarchy. Shamans having completed more šanar or šandruu are believed to have more power and more experience. A shaman’s power and experience, i.e. his/her rank in the shamanic society, is indicated by his/her paraphernalia and the accessories attached to his/her costume. By completing each consecration, a shaman receives new items of paraphernalia. For more on the šanar and šandruu consecrations, see Kümin, “Climbing Trees: The Transmission of Knowledge in Buryat Shamanism”; Tkacz, Sayan, and Phipps, Shanar: Dedication Ritual of a Buryat Shaman in Siberia – as Conducted by Bayır Rinchinov; Jokić, “Rejuvenating Buryat Shamanism: Trance, Initiation and the Quest for identity”; and Balogh, Contemporary Buriad Shamanism in Mongolia.


4. Ibid., 107–108.

5. On Buryat numerals, see Skribnik, “Buryat,” 110, about the reflexive marker preceded by the genitive, see 112–113.


7. Ibid., 112–116 (the whole invocation of Damdindorlig), 115 (the cited part).

8. Ibid., 116–120.

9. Ibid., 119.

10. Ibid., 121–124.

11. Ibid., 123.

12. The term xelmerše literally means interpreter. The interpreter is the shaman’s assistant, who not only interprets the words of the spirits to everyday language but offers them liquor, tobacco and food as well. The interpreter is the one who knows how to communicate with the spirits and in what order it is necessary to give them the offerings. About the role of the assistant, see Balogh, “Shamanic Traditions, Rites and Songs,” 94–95; and Balogh, Contemporary Buriad Shamanism in Mongolia, 28–29.

13. For the description of the ritual, see Balogh “Shamanic Traditions, Rites and Songs”; and Balogh, Contemporary Buriad Shamanism in Mongolia, 96–110.


15. About the offerings, see Balogh, “Shamanic Traditions, Rites and Songs,” 104–105.

16. Problem-solving rituals as their name suggests are intended to solve a patient’s problem that can be an illness, financial difficulties, hardships in intra-personal relationships and other various kinds of adversaries. About these types of rituals, I wrote in: Balogh, “Introduction to the Present-day Shamanic Practices,” 169–170; and in Balogh, Contemporary Buriad Shamanism in Mongolia, 153–171.

17. Yühen and yüsen (genitives: yühenei and yüsni respectively) are used interchangeably by Namsrai. In the Buryat language initial and intervocalic s changed into h. Buryats living in Mongolia, such as Namsrai often speak a mixed Halh-Buryat variety of the Mongolian language.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor
Mátyás Balogh is an adjunct lecturer at the Inner-Asian Department for Mongolian and Inner-Asian Studies of ELTE University Hungary. He obtained his PhD from the doctoral school of the same department in 2012. He holds an MA in Mongolian studies (2004) and sinology (2015). His research interests are Mongolian shamanism, contemporary spoken varieties of Mongolian, and more recently the history of Sino-Barbarian relations along China’s northern frontier.

ORCID
Mátyás Balogh http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6535-4024

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