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Morten Axel Pedersen's Not Quite Shamans

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[Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia](#)

by [Morten Axel Pedersen](#)

Cornell University Press, 2011. 272 pages, US\$28.95, paperback.

The intersection between the collapse of the Soviet state and the resurgence of religious practices has by now acquired a substantial body of scholarship both in anthropology and in other disciplines. A number of recent accounts are increasingly complicating the early “Transition” trope that posits a post-Soviet “ideological vacuum” to explain the seemingly spontaneous “occult” revival widely documented throughout former Soviet spaces. From tracking the echoes of Soviet political and administrative categories in religious and cultural expressions, to examining the ways in

which market logics come to articulate with cosmologies of witchcraft, this scholarship attends both to the resilience of socialist lifeworlds and institutions, and to the forms of resistance the circulation of economic, political, and scientific regimes generates. Morten Axel Pedersen's "Not Quite Shamans" is all the more remarkable for its ability to weave together Buddhist and shamanic ritual logics and expressions with the lived and remembered experiences of Soviet modernity, as it was imagined and implemented in northern Mongolia.

"Not Quite Shamans" begins with an ethnographer's dilemma, where the anthropologist's carefully laid out research plans run up against an apparently disappointing ethnographic reality. Initially intent on studying shamanism, Pedersen chose as a fieldsite the region in northern Mongolia known as the Darhad Depression, an area with a deep history of shamanic and Buddhist practices and statecraft, as well as one frequently defined by its political and economic marginality. However, upon his arrival Pedersen is told that no "genuine shamans" are left in the Ulaan-Uul district, where much of the ethnography takes place. Barring this "deficit" of authentic shamans, as Pedersen calls it, Ulaan-Uul abounds in people (mostly men) affected by *agsan*, a condition locally defined as "shaman-like," but that lacks the necessary attributes of proper shamanic embodiment. *Agsan* persons are endowed with shamanic essence and therefore susceptible to the actions of local nonhuman entities, such as the souls of animals and dead shamans, but are incapable of controlling them for lack of guidance from "genuine" holders of the shamanic tradition. As a result, stuck in a never completed process of becoming shaman, *agsan* people are regularly seized with a destructive and violent alcohol-fueled rage, and terrorize relatives and neighbors until the possession state passes. Pedersen's ethnographic account of his encounters with the realities of *agsan* – often hovering uncomfortably between comical and terrifying – sets the stage for a rich and thoughtful analysis of the nature of postsocialist shamanism and political power in northern Mongolia.

Pedersen takes *agsan* as the embodiment of a uniquely post-socialist collective malaise in the district of Ulaan-Uul: not as a "symptom" of post-socialist transition(s), but as "a distinct ontological condition in its own right" (p. 40). In this sense, *agsan*, as a form of "shamanism without shamans," concretizes the cosmological entanglements of lived post-socialism, bringing into alignment the histories of Buddhist ecclesiastical institutionalization, the legacies of Soviet collectivization and economic redistribution, the retraction of the welfare state, and long-standing relations between human and nonhuman agents in the Darhad landscape. Pedersen's analysis tracks the ways in which these apparently different domains (and histories) implicate each other in and around the politics of shamanism, which allows him to suggest in [Chapter 1](#) that the 1990s post-socialist Mongolian state is itself a distinctly

shamanic configuration. Following Viveiros de Castro's insights on Amerindian perspectivism (1998) and Marilyn Strathern's work on Melanesian kinship (2004), Pedersen suggests that the properties of the post-socialist state operate as deictics or shifters that take on meaning from multiple, perspectival embodied points of view (p. 63). From this perspective, Pedersen reverses the figure and ground of the relationship between the Soviet (and post-socialist) state and shamanic, or more broadly speaking, occult, ontologies. As he writes, "in northern Mongolia after socialism, it is not the state that encompasses the spirits, and thus defines their mode and their purpose of existence, but the spirits that encompass the state" (p. 79). Through his careful analysis of the (now largely ghostly) presences of communist state forms and infrastructures, Pedersen shows that the regulatory projects of Soviet modernity in Mongolia attempted (and ultimately failed) to contain the "multinatural" perspectivism of taiga cosmologies.

Chapter 2 follows the biographic example of Gombodorj, a local blacksmith and "not quite shaman" whose *agsad* episodes, inappropriate jokes, and uneasy relationships with the local community bring into focus the internal logics of Mongolian shamanism, while also illustrating their expressions among the peculiar "lost generation" cohort of *agsan*-prone men in Ulaan-Uul. Pedersen's ethnographic writing itself takes on the perspectival qualities of his subject matter, and the figure of Gombodorj eludes easy interpretation as his actions are refracted through multiple rationales and points of view. That Gombodorj becomes intensely familiar to the reader while remaining entirely opaque serves to illustrate one of Pedersen's main insights into Mongolian shamanism, namely that the shamanic persona is a complex and layered assemblage of differentiated human and nonhuman agencies.

Differentiation is not solely the attribute of shamanic personhood, or rather, shamanic personhood is only one place among many where differentiation as an ontological condition manifests. In Chapter 3, Pedersen explores the topographies of Darhad life, imbued with ever multiplying agencies – from uranium to place spirits – that articulate at multiple scales across local landscapes and in Darhad politics of identity. Nor are shamanic cosmologies simply contrasted to "rational" or "modern" ways of accounting for relationships with the local environment, or for the politics of economic and institutional marginality in present-day Mongolia. Instead, Pedersen offers an in depth analysis where "multinaturalist" perspectives of the Siberian taiga are woven together with the projects of cosmological ordering of Mongolian Buddhism. If the taiga is the home of "too many different things" (p. 116), Pedersen suggests, the different projects that have attempted to domesticate these unruly excesses (from this perspective, Mongolian Buddhism and the Soviet state share a certain commonality) are fractally replicated both at

the level of national politics and across individual personhood.

Chapter 4 tackles the problem of shamanic agency by asking what distinguishes *agsad*-prone half-shamans in the Darhad Depression from their full-fledged counterparts in neighboring regions. Pedersen offers a sensitive and complex account of shamanic ontologies, detailing the ways in which spirit guardians (*ongod*) exist as “inherently multiple entities” (p. 175) – much like the post-socialist state and the shaman’s body – and are always already in the process of changing and becoming. From this perspective, “shamanism without shamans” as the historical fallout of seventy years of anti-religious state policies is not so much a contradiction in terms, since human bodies are certainly not unique in being imbued with shamanic agency. Instead, the apparent “deficit” of shamans begins to transform into its opposite – an excess and proliferation of shamanic attributes.

In Chapter 5, Pedersen concludes with a discussion of shamanic humor, as it intersects with ideologies of Darhad cultural and ethnic distinction in Mongolia. While humor is an important part of shamanic ritual interaction, Pedersen draws our attention to the ways in which the practice of “telling lies” also recuperates and satirizes Soviet anti-religious propaganda, bringing into uncomfortable alignment present-day shamanism and the state. The doubts expressed about the veracity of what the spirits might have to say – and of whether they are, indeed, speaking – seem to exhibit, in Bakhtin’s idiom (1981), a form of double-voicing that disseminates “shamanic potentials” laterally, outside of the speech acts of shamanic ritual, and into the fabric of daily post-socialist lives in the Darhad region.

“Not Quite Shamans” offers a brilliant and rigorous example of building theory out of ethnography, but, as such, it also leaves unaddressed other potentially important avenues of analysis. For example, while Pedersen frames his account both in relation to the Soviet past and to the present encroachment of a deregulated market, the reader is sometimes left wondering about the impacts of the political economies of frontier capitalism, and especially of natural resource extraction, on ontologies where relationships across an animate landscape are of primary importance. Although the account of Darhad shamanic cosmology Pedersen provides is rich, complex, and elegant, it appears at times enclosed and self-generating. In this sense, Darhad shamanism acquires the paradoxical quality of being simultaneously marginalized and totalizing. However, “Not Quite Shamans” offers a path past the limits of an analytic framework that connects the emergence of “occult economies” in post-socialist contexts to an imperative for “meaning making” in the absence of other suitable landmarks (Lindquist 2005). Pedersen’s carefully detailed ethnography reminds his readers of the dangers of generalizing this apparently widespread phenomenon: apprehensions of

isomorphism elide deep and distinct local histories that bring together human and nonhuman agencies with expressions of political power, and that “Not Quite Shamans” makes so starkly and beautifully visible. If Darhad shamanism exhibits “irreducible plurality,” is also makes evident the political stakes – and perhaps anthropological pleasures – of resisting analytic commensuration.

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