

# IN THE WAKE OF VILMOS DIÓSZEGI

Problems of Shamanism in Mongolia in the 1960s and Nowadays

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## Introduction

Vilmos Diószegi (1923-72) graduated in Altaic (Manchu-Tungus) Philology in 1946 from the Department of Inner Asian Studies of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE, Budapest) under the guidance of Professor Lajos Ligeti. Then he worked at the Hungarian National Museum of Ethnography (1947-1963), and wrote his PhD (1958) about 'Shamanism in Hungarian Folklore' (see Hoppál 1998). He was one of the founding members of the Research Group of Ethnology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1963) which later became the Institute of Ethnology (1967). Between 1957 and 1964 he conducted six fieldtrips (see Diószegi 1968) to Southern Siberia<sup>1</sup> and Mongolia<sup>2</sup>. He also founded the 'Shamanic Archive' of our Institute, which unfortunately had no catalogue due to Diószegi's premature death in 1972. Diószegi's archive materials remained unpublished and without a reliable register or catalogue.

When I began to work at the institute forty years after Diószegi (2003), I was assigned to make that catalogue, to digitalize his materials and to publish them. In order to do that, one has to speak not only Russian but also about eight various Turkic and Mongolic languages and dialects<sup>3</sup>. I graduated in Mongolic and Turkic Philology in 2000 (ELTE) and conducted fieldwork<sup>4</sup> among the Turkic groups of Southern Siberia to study their language and folklore and visited most of the villages where Diószegi collected his materials between 1995 and 2005. I also made fieldtrips to the Tuva (Tofa/Toha)<sup>5</sup> groups of Mongolia between 1996 and 2008. In 2009 I have completed the digitalization and registration of his manuscript legacy (Somfai 2008, 2012) on shamanic research in Southern Siberia and Mongolia. There are 13 folders of his fieldtrip materials. Some of his recordings were also digitalized with the help of the Institute of Musicology. A great contribution was made by

our colleague, István Sántha, who also researched Diószegi's materials and started to publish his diaries and correspondence (Diószegi 2002) by permission of Diószegi's widow, the late Judith Morvay (1923-2002). Here I would like to concentrate on Diószegi's fieldtrips in Mongolia. He only wrote two articles about this trip (Diószegi 1961 and 1963).

## 1. Short description of his trip

Diószegi was invited to Mongolia by B. Rinchen (1905-1977) who obtained his doctorate at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1956 and became the head of the Institute of Language and Literature (1958). Diószegi arrived to Ulānbātar on May 13, 1960 after Rinchen had already been removed from his position on charges of nationalism. First he was accompanied by ethnographer S. Badamkhatan. On May 15 they set out for a fieldtrip to the Aga-Buriads of Dornod Aimag and they visited Bayan-ül *sum* (May 19-23/5 days) where he met the great female shaman (*udgan*) Shemed abgai of the Sharaid clan who refused to talk to him fearing persecution by the local authorities. He also met Pürew of the Sharaid clan and Osor of the Khamnigan (Tungus) clan, but they were never initiated as shamans. He returned to Ulānbātar on May 25 with no recordings since his tape-recorder was broken.

His next fieldwork started four days later on May 29 also accompanied by Badamkhatan. He went to Mörön, Khöwsgöl and later visited the Arig-Uriankhai in Tsagān-Üür, East of Lake Khöwsgöl (June 2)<sup>6</sup>, where he recorded material from the Uriankhai shamans: Shijrē, Jujūnai, Luwsandorj and Dolgor, the mixed Khalkha<sup>7</sup> Gunggājaw. They returned to Mörön<sup>8</sup> on June 6 and worked with a Darkhad shaman Damdin who was imprisoned there (June 7-8). In Bulgan he also met another mixed Khalkha-Khotogoid shaman

Dagwa *dzairan* (June 10). They left for Ulānbātar on June 11.

On his last fieldtrip he flew to Mörön (June 20) and then further to Rinchenkhūmbe Sum the following day. He was accompanied by Dawā, a half-Russian interpreter. From June 22 until July 5 (14 days) he conducted fieldwork by the rivers Kharmain-gol and Shigshid-gol among the Darkhads and Tofas. He met female shamans Khorol and Barī, male shamans Shagdar and Baljinnyam, and he visited several shamanic burial sites (*asar onggon*).

He returned to Ulānbātar<sup>9</sup> where accompanied by Rinchen he visited the famous Khotogoid shaman Togosīn Nandzad (July 15-16) and recorded 22 shamanic songs from him. (Slide 5) These songs were studied but never published by Magdalena Tatár (Oslo, Norway) although she published other materials (Tatár 2006).

## 2. Manuscript legacy

The typed texts of his manuscript legacy only contain material from the first two fieldwork accompanied by Badamkhatan. Altogether 61 pages have been preserved in the archives of our institute. On the recordings we find mostly the Khotogoid shaman Nandzad's invoking songs (*dūdalga*) but there are also recordings from Uriankhai, Darkhad and mixed Khalkha shamans<sup>10</sup>.

Before Diószegi's fieldwork very few data had been published about the shamanic traditions of the various ethnic groups in Mongolia. Diószegi immediately noticed that there are great differences between the traditions of these ethnic groups (Buriad, Darkhad, Khotogoid, Oirat, etc.). Diószegi further noticed that the clan systems of these particular ethnic groups also show very complex process of formation (called ethnogenesis those days) which makes the question even more complicated. He found elements of Turkic and Tungusic origin among the various Mongolic groups who also mixed with each other<sup>11</sup>. Diószegi believed that these processes can be best described by analyzing the elements of shamanic traditions. He said

that acculturation of the Buryats of Mongolia (becoming Khalkha) was also an interesting problem. Another problem he mentions is the influence of Buddhism and Islam (among Khotons and Turkic Kazaks).

## 3. Problems of Fieldwork

In the case of Diószegi's research he was facing several problems regarding his fieldwork among the various ethnic groups:

1) These groups either spoke very distinct dialect from the official Khalkha dialect (Buriad, Darkhad) or spoke a Turkic language (reindeer-keeping Tuva or Tofa). But Diószegi could not speak Khalkha only Russian and his interpreters were also Khalkha Mongols (e.g. Badamkhatan and Dawā) with sometimes limited knowledge of the local dialects or Russian.

2) Another difficulty was that Diószegi was also often accompanied by the local secret police which made it impossible to collect sincere information about the activities of shamans. Of course he could never take part in a real shamanic ritual where he could study the situation or context of these traditions. But Diószegi's data is still valuable because it was collected in a period of religious repression when almost nobody managed to conduct fieldwork in Mongolia. Although shamanic traditions of pre-revolution times lost their significance but they were secretly preserved among small groups in Mongolia free from the effects of modernization (urbanization, new ethnic and religious movements).

## 4. Aftermath of Diószegi's Fieldworks

In 2007 and 2008 I joined the project 'Collecting dialects and folk beliefs' started by the Department of Inner Asian Studies (ELTE) and Research Group of Altaic Studies (HAS) together with the Mongolian Academy of Sciences (Institute of Language and Literature, *Xel-dzoxiolin Xürēleng*). My goal was to visit all the sites of Diószegi's fieldwork in Mongolia (1960) and collect reliable data related to his material and his informants

(shamans).

I traveled to Dornod on August 6, 2007 and reached Bayan-ül two days later. Here I found out that Shemed abgai had been indeed a famous female shaman (*udagan*) and she continued to conduct rituals even until the middle of the 1970s secretly because the local secret police harassed her. I met a so-called shamanic interpreter (Buriad *tulmāsha*) Serenkhuyag who venerated Shemed *abgai* as an *onggon* spirit. I managed to photograph her old picture on an altar together with a felt bag. It contained the protecting idol (*haxiuhan*) Būral Ezhī made by the female shaman was also held. Shemed *abgai*'s son was also a shaman but died without a child or student. Now people are awaiting the root spirit (*ug*) of Shemed responsible for shamanic ability to choose someone from the clan to become shaman. There are many young shamans in the village and I interviewed one of them. Two shamans (*zārin*) with the highest rank (*shonar*) live in the neighboring sum of Bayan-Dun since the famous Seren *zārin* passed away. But locals told me that Seren *zārin* was from Khentī and they do not recognize his authority as a local Aga-Buriad shaman. In Bayan-ül Buriads mostly speak Khalkha so I left for Dashbalbar to collect the Aga-Buriad dialect.

There locals were holding an *obō* ritual conducted by the Khamnigan *zārin* from Bayan-dun. In Dashbalbar I also met an *udagan* who was sick so she only showed her Abgaldai mask inherited from her great grandmother who was also a shaman. The Khamnigan *zārin* invited me to his house in Bayan-dun. He invoked the spirit of Abgaldai (Diószegi 1968b) who was a powerful Khamnigan (Tunguz) black shaman and sold his children for tobacco and vodka.

Later I was also invited to a farmer's house by the Ūlzain-gol River, where his clan (Khargana *omog*) held a ritual to worship their ancestor spirit (*ug xündel-*). The shaman who conducted the ritual was Khalkha, but he received shamanic ability (*ug bari-*) through his Buriad mother. The ritual started in the evening and lasted till the following

noon. During the night he invoked various spirits and also put up the Abgaldai mask. At the end of the ritual he cleansed (*ugāлга*) the participants by the water of arashān and they carried the decorated (*zuramlahan*) birch trees three times around the house before they burnt them.

I returned to Bayan-ül where I managed to collect Khamnigan dialect from an old lady. She was one of the Khamnigans who could speak and sing in her ancestor's Mongolian dialect. I also wanted to go to Ereen village but I only reached the nearby place of Kharkhirā where the Seren *zārin*'s adopted son Oyūnbātar (Balogh 2007) was holding *shonar* initiation (Shimamura 2014: 197-227) rituals for all kinds of young 'neo-shamans' mostly form Ulānbātar.

Next year I travelled to Mörön (Khöws-göl) and to Tsagān Nūr sum on July 25. I went to Kharmain-gol where Diószegi had spent two weeks collecting material about Darkhad and Tofa shamanism. I visited the burial places (*asar onggon*) of some famous Darkhad shamans also visited by Diószegi. On the first day of the New Moon I visited a local Darkhad shaman Nergüi who performed a healing ritual for an old Tofa lady. He also showed his *onggon* pictures. Some of them he inherited from his father-in-law Shagdar, who even sang a shamanic song to Diószegi when they met in 1960. Because I wanted to compare Darkhad and Tofa shamanic rituals I borrowed a horse from the shaman and with a Tofa family I visited the West Taiga of the reindeer-keepers. I already had visited the East Taiga twice and had met female shaman Sende, daughter of the famous Suyā but unfortunately both of them died since. So I went to two shaman brothers Kostā and Ganzorig of the Balykshy clan in the West Taiga. Kostā was ill but Ganzorig performed an *obō* sacrifice for us.

Later I have found out that the famous Tofa shaman mentioned by Diószegi, Gombo of the Soyān clan also passed on his shamanic ability (*dös*) to a young man Khalzan, whose mother was his sister. I interviewed Khalzan who also had Gombo's *onggon* (Tofa *ēren*) and a special kind of

three-headed stick (*ūsh dayak*) too (See Diószegi 1968: 238-241). Nowadays the younger generation of Tofas speaks Darkhad and Khalzan learned Tofa only to be able to talk with his *onggon*. I have found him an interesting informant and decided to witness his spirit invoking ritual rather than the old shaman's to observe how the younger generation thrives but preserves old shamanic traditions too.

## 5. Arising problems of shamanic traditions in Mongolia Nowadays

I) Difference between Buriad and Darkhad shamanic traditions:

Diószegi has already noticed the influence of Turkic and Tungusic shamanic traditions among various Mongolic ethnic groups. If we compare the two main shamanic traditions existing in Mongolia we realize that they are not connected to any particular ethnic or linguistic group but rather regional traditions.

II) Turkic and Tungusic influences, interethnic cultural relations:

1) Western Mongolian: Darkhad and Tuva traditions

2) Eastern Mongolian: Buriad and Khamnigan traditions

Even though nowadays people often talk about Mongolian or Buriad shamanism these are the products of modern ethnic movements (nationalism, ethnicity) while traditionally they were the product of interethnic cultural relations between groups that also mixed with each other through exogamy. Comparison of Darkhad and Buriad shamanic traditions:

Buriad and Khamnigan (Evenki/Tungus)	Darkhad and Uriankhai (Tuva/Tofa/Soyot/Karagas)
Male shaman <i>böö</i>	Male shaman <i>dzārin</i>
Female shaman <i>udgan</i>	Female shaman <i>udgan</i> (Tuva kham)
High ranked shaman <i>zārin</i>	
Distinction between Black and white shamans Different devices and garments	No distinction
Initiation rituals All together 13 rituals (highest rank) Black shamans: <i>shamar</i> White shamans: <i>shandrū</i>	No initiation rituals (only initiation for the drum <i>xenggereg</i> , Tuva <i>dünggür</i> )
The use of shamanic tree for initiations Khamnigan <i>tūrū</i> (Evenki <i>туру</i> )	No shamanic tree
Period of shaman rituals Usually 9th, 19th, 29th day of the lunar month ( <i>yühenggöö xexe</i> )	Usually during the new- moon ( <i>sarīn shine</i> ) of the lunar month (Tuva <i>ay chāzī</i> ) No shamanic rituals during the old-moon ( <i>sarīn khūchin</i> )
Daytime and night rituals Daytime white rituals (ances- tor spirits) Night black rituals (demons)	Usually night rituals Daytime rituals rarely without drum ( <i>tayag, khūr</i> ) Usually night rituals Daytime rituals rarely without drum ( <i>tayag, khūr</i> )
The shaman's body is merely incorporated by spirits ( <i>onggon orūlaxa</i> )	The shaman's body is incorporated by spirits but it also travels to sacred sites of ancestors
No worshipping by shamanic tombs ( <i>arangga</i> )	Worshipping by shamanic tombs ( <i>asar ongon</i> )
Shamanic paraphernalia Black shamans: drum ( <i>xese</i> ) drumstick ( <i>toibūr</i> ) crown ( <i>orgoi</i> ) horse-headed staffs ( <i>morin horīb</i> ) mask <i>Abgaldai</i> (Tungus origin) White shamans: staff and whip ( <i>bayag and bardag</i> )	Shamanic paraphernalia  drum ( <i>xenggereg</i> ) drumstick ( <i>orwo</i> , Tuva <i>orba</i> ) three-branched staff ( <i>tayag</i> , Tuva <i>dayak</i> )
Receiving ability from the ancestor spirits ( <i>udxa-uzūr, ug</i> ) from the Sky ( <i>neryēr lightning</i> )	Receiving ability from ancestor spirits ( <i>ug</i> ) only

### III) Difference between Turkic and Mongolic shamanic tradition:

The major difference between these two linguistic groups is the experience of trance or ecstasy: shamanic journey and possession. Shamans among Southern Siberian Turks (Altay, Khakas, Tuva) as well as Darkhads experience shamanic journey where the soul (Mongolic *sünesün*, Turkic *kut*) travels to the spiritual world (emic term for trance is Tuva *sünezin/kut ün-* "soul leaves"). Mongolic shamans (Buriad, Khamnigan, Bargu, Daur) experience possession trance where the shaman's body is possessed by a spirit (*onggon*) and act as a medium between the spirit and the clan (emic term is *onggon or-* "spirit/sacred enters").

IV) Continuous but changing shamanic traditions  
Forty years after Diószegi I found reviving shamanic traditions among the Aga Buriads of Dornod but these shamans can be divided in three groups:

#### 1) Traditional Buriad shamanism

They are hiding and suspicious shamans living in poverty working inside one clan. Traditionally the ancestor spirit (*ug*) of a clan (*obog*) was responsible for someone to become a shaman (*ugtai*) in most cases. These spirits were treated with a lot of taboo and would not be invoked by the shamans of other clans.

#### 2) Traditional but revitalized 'modern' Buriad shamanism

Shamans take their shamanic rituals to other clans and villages if requested. Modern Buriad shamans as noticed by other scholars (Buyandelger 2013, Shimamura 2004, 2014 etc.) use shamanic tradition to strengthen their ethnic identity thus they do not limit their activity to their own clan. By ignoring this restriction shamans can initiate unlimited number of disciples who can work for various Buriad clans as well as other Mongolic groups, especially the Khalkha majority. Buriads of Mongolia have a double identity so they also identify themselves as being generally Mongols.

#### 3) Shamans performing for tourists and western

anthropologists

Shamanic traditions are now being commercialized since most of the shamans moved into Ulānbātar. They have founded several associations of shamans (e.g. Golomt, etc). I have visited some of these associations where they receive patients like in an ordinary clinic.

#### 3) Neo-shamanism tightly connected with urban shamanism

It is a serious business connected to shamanic tourism with the participation of urban shamans and shamans of different regions (Khöwsgöl, Altai, etc.). Many psychological and medical problems of post-communist Mongolia are being treated by these neo-shamans who move to Ulānbātar and other smaller towns to increase the number of patients. Shamanic initiation is often offered as a mean for healing these problems regardless of the clan or ethnic background of the patient. Khalkha patients also have to come up with an ancestor spirit (*ug*) although they have lost their clan system during the Manchu Era (1690-1911). Some Khalkha people believe that they are the only pure Mongols so they originate from Chinggis-khan's clan the Borjigid also called the Golden Clan (*altan urug*).

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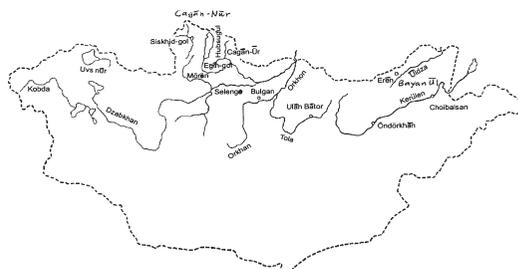


Fig.1 Diószegi's expedition to Mongolia in 1960



Fig.2 Diószegi visiting the great Khotogoid shaman Nandzad with academician B. Rinchen in 1960 (Töv aimag, close to Ulaanbaatar)



Fig.3 Shemed *abgai* the Buriad female shaman (*udgan*) whom Diószegi met in 1960

Chart 1. Shamans met by Diószegi

① Buriad and Khamnigan	Dornod, Bayan-ül	
Name and age	Clan	Sex
Shemed*	Sharaid	female
Pürew	Sharaid	male
Damdin**	Khöwdüüd	male
Bold**	Khaliban	male
② Khalkha	Bulgan	
Mijigin Gungājaw, 60	Kharül	male
Pürwīn Dagwa	--	male
③ Khotogoid	Töv aimag	
Togosin Nandzad	--	male
④ Arig Uriankhai	Khöwsgöl, Tsagān-üür	
Damdinī Dolgor, 53	--	male
Pürewin Luwsandorj, 49	--	male
Jujūnai	--	female
⑤ Darkhad	Khöwsgöl, Rinchenkhümbe	
Öwgīn Baljinnyam, 75	Tsagaan khuular	male
Süren***	Tsagaan khuular	female
Dzūgderin Shagdar	Tsagaan khuular	male
Tsewenī Khorol*	Ulaan (khar) khuular	male
Jambīn Damdin, 53	Ulaan (khar) khuular	female
Dugarin Bari	Ulaan (khar) khuular	male

\* Diószegi met them but they refused to give information

\*\* He met their sons Damdinī Bawuudorj and Boldin Jadamba

\*\*\* He met her husband Tsewendorj (Soyod male)

- 1 He conducted fieldwork in 1957 among Bulagat-Buriads and Abakan Tatars (Sagais), in 1958 among Tofas (Uda River), Tuvas and in 1964 to Altay Turks (Kumandy, Telengit).
- 2 He did fieldwork in 1960 among Aga-Buriad, Khamnigan, Khotogoid, Arig-Uriankhai, Darkhad, and Tofa.
- 3 Turkic: Tuva and Tofa (Toha), Altay, Khakas (Agban Tatar) as well as Mongolic: Khalkha, Bulagat and Aga-Buriad, Darkhad
- 4 I visited in 1995 Altay-kizhi, Telengit and Tuvas, in 1998 Abakan Tatars and Tuvas, in 2002 Altay-Kizhi, Telengit, Kumandy, in 2005 Tuvas.
- 5 Reindeer-keeping Tuva groups (tsātan) pronounce their ethnonym as Tofa or Toha.
- 6 Diószegi's unpublished diary ends on June 2.
- 7 These Khalkha shamans were of mixed origin, Khalkha father and Uriankhai mother but the root spirit (ug) of their shamanic ability could be inherited from their maternal side.
- 8 According to his letters he spent only five days among the Arig-Uriankhai.
- 9 His correspondence ends on July 8.
- 10 All together there are 52 songs mostly sang by Khotogoid shaman Nanzad (34 songs). Others are recorded from Uriankhai shamans Dolgor (1 song) and Luwsandorj (3 songs), Khalkha shamans Gunggājaw (2 songs) and Dagwa (1 song), Darkhad shamans Damdin (3 songs), Shagdar (2 song), Bari (2 songs) and Tsewendorj (3 songs), who was not a shaman and sang the songs of his late wife.
- 11 For example the Darkhad and Tuva, as well as the Buriad and Khamnigan (see Diószegi 1967 and 1968b).