The Mongol World

Timothy May, Michael Hope

Shamans at the Court of the Qa'an

Publication details
Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog
Published online on: 26 May 2022

How to cite :- Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog. 26 May 2022, Shamans at the Court of the Qa'an from: The Mongol World Routledge
Accessed on: 29 Nov 2023
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

SHAMANS AT THE COURT OF THE QA’AN

Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog

Shamans profess to gain power and knowledge by entering into the benevolent and often malevolent spiritual world. The shamanistic tradition of the Mongols is centered in worshiping Tenggeri (heaven) with its chief deity, Qormusta Tenggeri. Various aspects of Tenggeri worship are described in historical sources, particularly in The Secret History of the Mongols. These aspects included predicting natural calamities, like solar or lunar eclipses, and communing with spirits to penetrate into the minds traveling through space and time. They performed scapulimancy for predicting wars, overcoming causes of human and social troubles, as well as performing fire purification ceremonies.

ROLE OF THE SHAMAN

John Andrew Boyle, in his article “Turkish and Mongolian Shamanism in the Middle Ages,” explained the etymology and meaning of the term shaman, stating the Tungusic origin of the word; the Turks call their shamans qam and the Mongols bö’e. According to Ch. Dalai, qam and its derivation as gan and gan’ stand for khan in Mongolian, as a leader of a clan.

The clan-based Mongolian society of the thirteenth century possessed a complex spiritual hierarchy, and it was common for the shamans to claim a leadership position within the major clans. This work claims that the internal strife within the golden lineage (altan urugh) was provoked through the assistance of shamans to eliminate one or another contestant to the throne.

A review of modern literature concerning shamanism in Mongolia reveals a more anthropological understanding of the spiritual framework of shamanistic ideas, reading and explaining the shamanistic rituals from the various traditions of modern Mongolia. I aim to view the role of shamans from a historical perspective, their manifestation in the time of the Yeke Monggol Ulus. Undoubtedly, shamanism in Mongolia predates the time of Chinggis Khan, as the Chinese of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) feared the soothsayers of the Xiongnu Empire. The major studies of
early Mongolian shamanism by D. Bazarov, Ch. Dalai, B. Rinchen, S. Badamkhataan, Kh. Buyanbat, D. Mansan, and O. Purev, trace its origins to the Paleolithic era and to the matriarchal lineage of the Mongols. Among these scholars, the Sinologist Ch. Dalai gives several terms for shamanism from Chinese sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, where samao stands for a female shaman.

Many of these female shamans assumed high positions within their tribes and were called Eduggen/Idughan. The modern name for a female shaman – Udgan – is derived from this term. However, during the twelfth century, the chieftain of a clan and tribe [whether female or male] was called beki. In the Codex Cumanicus, a handbook of Qipchaq or Cuman language compiled in Crimea at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the term for a female shaman is rendered qam qatun, or lady.

Persian, Latin, and Armenian sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries mentioned the shamanistic rituals as the magical practice of soothsayers or as sorcery. Juvayni says that the qam (his term for shamanism) was a discipline of magic, art, and astrology; and the Mongols were obedient to the words of those who performed qam. While Juvayni and others may have viewed the shamans as sorcerers, the Mongol shamans were primarily concerned with communing with Tenggeri, and it was distinct from sorcery, although for special cases, such as overcoming natural calamities and human illness, it had some elements of black magic as well.

According to William of Rubruck, there was an entire group of shamans, headed by a chief, who resided at a designated place within the qa’an’s ordu, and a yurt for the beki was built in front of the qa’an’s ger. The influential political role of the beki at the Mongol court and the dual function of shamans as leaders of the clan and as ritualistic performers within the Chinggisid clan caused a complication in the process of building a united ulus. Although it is known that, with the help of Altan, Sacha, and Quchar, the beki of Qiyat Borjigid lineage, Chinggis Khan was able to rise over the Mongol tribes in 1206, but the process of unification lasted until 1209. Chinggis Khan’s primary focus was to rearrange the social strata of clan-based nomadic society, in which the shamans or bekis were still important as chiefs. To eliminate the role of tribal leaders, he introduced a new system of military-civil society where a military unit of a thousand irgen (members of society) would be the foundation of the new-born ulus, and each member of this society, whether a noble or ordinary person, could serve as a soldier. In this system, the political, legal, and religious aspects were designed to be supportive and coherent to each other. Chinggis Khan himself chose 95 persons as military commanders of thousands, according to their merits and skills. In reality, these commanders replaced most of the bekis in quriltai and therefore in the decision-making process. From this period onward, the aristocratic strata of nomadic society was not drawn from the heads of former tribes but from the commanders (noyans).

This reform had the far-reaching goal of shaping the religious life of the nomads. The primary purpose of the nomads’ worship was to recognize the absolute power of Qormusta Tenggeri or Möngke Tenggeri (eternal heaven). The shamans were mediators who read the signs or edicts of Tenggeri, which was the main qualification of the shamans’ importance. In the quriltai of 1206, the chief shaman Teb Tenggeri, a son of Mönglik of Qongqotan lineage and a chief shaman of that time, proclaimed...
Temüjin to be recognized by heaven. However, Chinggis Khan saw Teb Tenggeri, and his power to read and interpret the will of heaven, as an adversary to him and a threat to his rise as the leader of a unified state. Therefore, Chinggis Khan realized that he could invoke the idea of the absolute power of eternal heaven himself to justify his reign and thus to be recognized by others. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, Temüjin’s affiliation to the supreme power was revealed by a blood clot in his hand at the time of his birth, the charisma shown in his face and eyes, and his success in warfare, which were supposedly decreed by heaven.¹⁶

The shamans surely opposed the usurpation of their office by Chinggis Khan. Although Teb Tenggri understood he was in great danger and attempted to sow discord among the members of the Chinggisid clan, Chinggis Khan allowed his brother Otchigin to solve this problem by organizing a wrestling competition, in which Teb Tenggeri’s spine was broken and, thus, he was killed.¹⁷ This act was seen as Tenggeri’s displeasure with Teb Tenggri.¹⁸

Although another shaman was appointed as beki, the khan prayed directly to heaven and performed divination by using scapulae on his own. Möngke Tenggeri or a heavenly mandate became the conventional object of worship within the Yeke Monggol Ulus, which did not seek to place shamanism over the other religions. People of any religion could act freely, provided that their doctrine or dogma did not contradict the state ideology. Chinggis Khan’s descendants who were recognized as the “golden lineage,” developed this idea in a more sophisticated form of tolerance to any religion, whether it was Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Daoism.

**SHAMANS AND POLITICS**

After the death of Chinggis Khan, however, this ideology of a heavenly mandate transformed into the worship of the khan and the khan’s deeds and, once again, the shamans became powerful at the qa’an’s court and the princely houses. The shamans would be seated uppermost in the noble assembly and received the offerings. Although their role as chiefs lessened, they were given greater influence behind the political scenes. Their ability to read heaven’s will could still be directed against the royal household. This occurred during Ögödei’s reign (1229–1241), when shamans were involved actively in the death of Tolui, the youngest son of Chinggis Khan in 1232. *The Secret History of the Mongols* claims that the youngest brother voluntarily sacrificed his life to save Ögödei from a fatal illness and drank magical water, used to wash the body of his brother. According to the shamans, the evil spirits of earth and water maligned Ögödei during his campaign in north China, and thus one of the khan’s family members had to be sacrificed, namely, Tolui.¹⁹

Why Tolui? In my view, Tolui (1191–1232/1233) was the strongest figure among the sons of Chinggis Khan. Rashid al-Din states that Tolui had no peer in bravery, courage, strategy, and tactics.²⁰ From a very young age, he was involved in the battles of his father, who consulted him and called him nökör [liege man]; he participated in campaigns against the Jin dynasty in 1213; he took Bukhara and Samarqand with his father in 1219; was in Khurasan, Nishapur, and Merv in 1220–1221; battled against Xi Xia in 1227; and from 1227 to 1230 he was regent in lieu of his brother’s appointment. After his father’s death, as the youngest son, he inherited the homelands and commanded the largest and most powerful army in central Mongolia.²¹ Tolui,
along with Sübedei, planned and commanded Ögödei’s campaign against the Jin dynasty in 1231–1232, successfully besieging Kaifeng, the capital of Jin.

The majority of the Mongol nobles supported Tolui’s right to inherit Chinggis Khan’s property. Nevertheless, Ögödei was chosen as the successor of Chinggis Khan. The division of power between the two brothers provoked conflict over irgen (people) and land. Nevertheless, the division of irgen was “amicably” agreed between the two brothers, and Tolui obeyed his father’s wish and supported Ögödei and remained near him, unlike the Jochids and Chaghadaids, who stayed at a distance. But traditions surrounding the transmission of power were on Tolui’s side, as the youngest son. Thus, the shamans, who regained power in the qa’an’s court, orchestrated the elimination of a skillful opponent of Ögödei. Thus, Tolui’s death can be seen as a case of politically motivated assassination among the Chinggisids with the direct involvement of the shamans behind the scenes. Ögödei’s grief over the youngest brother’s death was short.

This murder was a key moment for the Toluids and occasioned bloody retribution when they rose to power against the Ögödeids. Indeed, Tolui’s sons, Möngke, Qubilai, Ariq Böke, and Hülegü, shaped the destiny of the Mongol Empire.

With the rise of the Toluids, the shamans remained important in performing the common rituals for treating misfortunes, while also detecting and averting them in princely courts. Shamanism was intricately connected with the daily life of the Mongols, whether royal or common people. Yet the Toluids’ religious policy was enriched by the recognition of other beliefs. Thus, the shamans were obliged to coexist with the Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic clergy. It is interesting to speculate whether Möngke Qa’an intended to win the hearts of the shamans since there is no evidence except for the witchcraft of the Muslim lady Fatima Khatun. It is not known whether Möngke’s purge after his enthronement included the shamans as well.

The scholarship of N. Ishjamts and Ch. Dalai indicates that Möngke’s preferred faith was shamanism, which is supported by the Yuan shi. However, it is difficult to prove that Möngke favored the shamans. He knew his father, Tolui, died because of the shamans’ conspiracies. In one instance, one of Möngke’s court ladies, who was Christian, became ill, and the shaman accused the lady’s maid of being a witch and of conspiring to kill her. A shaman once predicted that a newborn son of Möngke would be a great khan and that he would have a long life; however, the prince died soon after this occasion. The mother of the child became furious and punished the shaman. The qa’an left his court for a month to avoid the shaman’s spell.

One can claim that Möngke Qa’an was a Buddhist, due to a Tibetan source that states that Möngke Qa’an appointed the Buddhist Garma bagshi (teacher) as a state teacher. In Christian sources, the Mongol qa’an was a Christian, since he dispatched his brother Hulegu to liberate Jerusalem, if we believe Hayton, the Armenian historian. In 1254, Rubruck, visiting Möngke Qa’an’s court, met the Christian Armenian monk who was prepared to baptize the Mongol qa’an, whose mother, Sorqoqtani, was a Nestorian Christian. Therefore, it is difficult to state that Möngke was a believer in shamanism. Throughout his reign, all religions flourished. When Rubruk visited Qaraqorum, he noticed 12 Buddhist monasteries, 2 Islamic mosques, and several Christian churches.

Möngke initiated religious debates between Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist clergy. Many religious scholars participated in these debates, but no shamans. However, in a later period, the shamans performed calendric rituals alongside
Christian Nestorian priests and joined the Tibetan Buddhist monks in the ancestral temple worship. In general, when the court of the khans was dominated by either Buddhist bagshi or Muslim teachers, shamans left the court and practiced their rituals among the common people.

CONCLUSION

During the reign of successive states, whether the Yuan or Ilkhanid court, the sources speak more of Buddhists among the royal family, alongside the Christian and Muslim converts. Yet shamanism remained an important aspect of the culture and ideology of the Mongols. Shamanistic rituals were incorporated into the daily life of the Mongols, but the immediate involvement of the shamans in the political arena was curtailed for good.

NOTES

1 Qormusta is to be equated with Ahura Mazda, the chief Iranian (Zoroastrian) god.
4 Dalay 1959, 15.
5 Barfield 1989, 65.
7 Далай 1959, 5.
8 Eduggen/Idughan is the name of a female spirit that means origin.
9 Beki is also a title for a princess. The shift from female shamans to male shamans can be explained by the shift in labor distribution, Далай 1959, 14.
10 Boyle 1972, 179.
11 HWC, 59; Rubruck, 240–241; Blake and Frye 1949, 289.
12 HWC, 59.
14 SHM §123.
15 SHM §202.
16 SHM §62.
17 This event happened around the 1210s. SHM §244–245.
18 SHM, §246.
19 SHM §272.
20 RDT, 375.
21 RDT, 377–378.
22 Especially when it was revealed that the death of Köten, the brother of Güyük, was due to the witchcraft of Fatima Khatun, the confidant of Töregene Khatun, wife of Ögödei Qa’an and mother of Güyük. See Golev 2017, 132–144.
23 Ишжамц 1974, 124; Далай 2006, 257.
24 Rubruck, 243.
25 Rubruck, 244.
26 Бугд Найрамдах Монгол Ард Улсын Түүх, УБ., ШУ АХ., 1966, 271.
28 Rubruck, 222–223.
29 Rubruck, 221.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Badamhataan, S. (1965) Хөвсгөлүн Дархад ястан. Улаанбатар: ШУАХ.


Бүгд Найрамдах Монгол Ард Улсын Түүх, УБ, ШУАХ, 1966.


Далай, Ч. (1959) Монголын боо мөргөлийн тоочтуу. Улаанбатар: Шинжлэх ухаан боловсролын хүрээлэнгийн ЭШ-ийн үндэслэл.


HWC, See List of Abbreviations.

Ишжамц Н. (1974) Монголд нэгдсэн тор байгуулагдаж феодализм бүрэлдэн тогтсон нь, УБ, ШУАХ.


RDT, See List of Abbreviations.

Ruback, See List of Abbreviations.

SHM, See List of Abbreviations.