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# Social anthropological, folkloric, and linguistic research among the Khotogoit people in Northern Mongolia on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the death and one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Vilmos Diószegi (1923–1972)

A preliminary fieldwork report

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1. In 2022, we primarily undertook to set off from Bashkortostan towards the next region to the East and carry out social anthropological, folkloric, and linguistic fieldwork and archival research among the Siberian (also known as Baraba) Tatars. Our prior hypothesis was that we could thus find a link between the regions of the Southern Urals and Southern Siberia through the Siberian Tatars, between the Ugric Eastern Khantys and the Southern Samoyeds.
2. To achieve this, we found it expedient to examine:
  - 1, the missing link between Southern Urals and Southern Siberia, the Ugrians (Eastern Khantys) and Southern Samoyeds, and
  - 2, the role played by Vilmos Diószegi's research in local archives in assisting the local intelligentsia to develop through education.
3. Then we were forced to think it over: what regions remain for us to visit due to the Russo-Ukrainian war. In 2022, we no longer had the option of visiting Russia to reinterpret the materials collected by Vilmos Diószegi in southern Siberia; however, fieldwork in northern Mongolia allowed us to commemorate worthily, in line with the aims of our original project, the great researcher of Inner Asia on the fiftieth anniversary of his death (2022) and the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth (2023). (1)
4. We intended to implement the project according to the following work plan:
  - 1) Examine the missing link between Southern Siberia and Northern Mongolia in the heart of Inner Asia;
  - 2) Interpret, by relying on documents kept in the local KGB archives in Mongolia on Vilmos Diószegi and his research, the role played by the personality and research of Vilmos Diószegi in assisting the local Mongolian intelligentsia to develop through education.
5. On the other hand, as part of the fieldwork, we wanted to interpret the materials collected by Vilmos Diószegi in the 1950s and 1960s in Inner Asia (in 1957, 1958, and 1964 in Southern Siberia, while in this case, his 1960s fieldwork in northern Mongolia) to commemorate worthily, in line with our original ambitions, the great

Hungarian ethnologist on the 50th anniversary of his death and the 100th anniversary of his birth.

6. On 22 July 2022, we commemorated the 50th anniversary of the death of our ethnologist colleague Vilmos Diószegi, who died young (when 49 years old). To mark the anniversary and to assist in the preparations for the publication of Vilmos Diószegi's letters (and diary) of his 1960 fieldwork in Mongolia, in July this year (2022), we set off for a field trip to the northern region of Mongolia (Khövsgöl county), where Diószegi conducted his research.
7. After we arrived in Ulaanbaatar, we gave a paper in Mongolian and Russian on Vilmos Diószegi's research in Mongolia at the Institute of History and Ethnography of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. In addition, we met the director of our host institute (C. Batbajar), with whom we discussed our future cooperation (historical and scientific history background of Vilmos Diószegi's research). We also met the director of the Institute of Language and Literature (J. Bat-Ireedüi), with whom we also discussed our cooperation (Mongolian epic tradition and shamanic folklore). In addition, we participated in a neo-shamanic healing ritual conducted by a town shaman of Darhat origin in the suburb of Ulaanbaatar.
8. Then we went to Khövsgöl county (700 km northwest of Ulaanbaatar). We traveled to the county center (Mörön), where we recorded interviews with local elderly informants from among the local minorities (Khotogoit, Darhat, Buriad). We mainly asked them about the religious and cultural situation in the 1960s. They shared several details about the Darhat informant of Diószegi, Damdin Dzarín, a shaman, who was languishing in the Mörön prison. We met Khotogoit shamans who were still active then. We asked them about another important informant of Diószegi, the Khotogoit T. Nandzad dzarín, and Khotogoit shamanic traditions in general and shamanic practices still alive today.
9. We met an elderly Khotogoit epic singer, a master of *kai* (throat-)singing practiced according to the Western Mongolian (Uriankhai) tradition. In addition, we collected information from a local Buriad lama and visited the buildings of the Möröni *hüree* (Buddhist monastery). We went to the Town Museum of Mörön, which has a rich collection of shamanic objects.
10. We visited a Khotogoit nomadic summer accommodation (juslang) in the Tosontsengel region, where we also collected information from an elderly informant. We also went to the Museum of Bulgan County, where Diószegi had also worked during his research in the region. Unfortunately, despite our expectations, we have not found any shamanic objects here.
11. On our return to Ulaanbaatar, we found several details about the Mongolian scholars and interpreters who assisted Diószegi during his fieldwork in Mongolia (B. Rincsen, S. Badamhatan, O. Pürev and Davá). We informed our Mongolian colleagues about the purpose of our field research. We also talked to them about Diószegi's field research and materials collected in Mongolia (photographs, diaries, notebooks) and his research results (publications). It was a necessary step as they might have heard about the Hungarian researcher from their masters; however, they did not have a thorough knowledge of the importance and specificity of his research.

12. The fieldwork contributed a lot to the processing of the Diószegi estate and the clarification of missing data. At the same time, it also opened the way for exciting new field research (Mongolian epic tradition, shamanic folklore, tradition, and nation-building) and cooperation (initiating joint research).
13. We would have liked to enter the archives of the Mongolian KGB to see reports by Mongolian intelligence officials about the activities of the Hungarian researcher of shamanism. But when we made our request, we felt astonished by our Mongolian colleagues, and nobody showed willingness to help us. The subject is still a sensitive topic, which suggests that the socialist era has not passed without a trace and that the documents that bear witness to its details are still guarded vigilantly. No one wanted to become visible to this sector of the regime for our sake. The only interpretative framework of our request was that we wanted to attempt to reconstruct the social history of Mongolian science. That was considered worthy of support, which is remarkable even if it was no chance to work in the KGB archives.
14. We managed to unravel several threads of Vilmos Diószegi's research. We have visited museums, research institutes, and Buddhist shrines, exploring traces of other institutions of local importance where he had worked. We met people who had met him or heard about him from others.
15. We contacted the students of Diószegi's helpers and colleagues. Diószegi went to Mongolia by Byambiin Rinchen's invitation. Professor Rinchen acquired his doctorate with help from Lajos Ligeti in Hungary in the mid-fifties (1956). During our trip to Mongolia, we learned that Rinchen, a person with nationalistic sentiments, had problems with the representatives of the socialist authorities after his return home. As it happened in 1956, Rinchen invited Diószegi to Mongolia as the head of the Institute of Linguistics, but by the time of Diószegi's trip in 1960, been removed from that position. Thus, despite his preliminary plans and intentions, he had no opportunity to help Diószegi effectively in managing his expedition. Rinchen, simply in fact, after Diószegi's return to Ulaanbaatar (in August 1960), had a chance to support him. They visited the summer accommodation of one of the Khotogoit shamans in the neighbourhood of Ulanbaatar, an encounter that has shot several photographs.
16. To realize his plans, Diószegi involved several local helpers, students, and young researchers in his research efforts. Their encounter with Diószegi and the joint research influenced their professional careers. Diószegi's attitude and perseverance drew their attention to the hitherto persecuted values and roots of their own (shamanic) culture. The students of these helpers are now retired or, in some cases, active researchers, cherishing the work of their teachers and Diószegi's helpers. They aim to publish diaries and field booklets of the joint trips with Diószegi. Again and again, they publish monographs and collection volumes of studies based on the fieldwork with Diószegi. So, we were knocking on open doors when we gave an account that we were working on a collection volume of Diószegi's letters and a diary from his fieldwork in 1960 and looking for Mongolian partners for their publication in Mongolia.
17. Quite by accident, Chuluun Sampildondov, the head of the newly built Chinggis Khaan Museum, being inaugurated, gave us the favour of showing us, at our

request, two shaman costumes and the related tools originating from Diószegi's research territory. To our astonishment, the shamanic objects presented were familiar to us. We recognized them from Diószegi's photographs; however, while in his case, we had seen black and white images of shamanic objects held by rural museums, in this case, a vivid interplay of deep-toned colours and intricately textured materials unfolded before our eyes in the metropolitan Museum. The metaphoric content of the creatures of the upper and lower worlds ceased to be symbolic. The shamanic objects became similar to pulsate, vibrate, and come to life through the shades and fabrics. It was a tremendous experience to witness Diószegi's photographs becoming coloured and coming to life through the original objects.

18.

Many details about the contemporary manifestations and practices of Northern Mongolian shamanism, its fusion with Tibetan Buddhism, and its embeddedness in Mongolian Lamaism have been clarified and recorded in the knowledge of recent Western anthropological criticisms of Diószegi's work. Recent shamanic ritual practices may become familiar to us only in the context of Mongolian Buddhist practices. It does not make sense, nor is it possible to separate and interpret them independently. Something seen as old does not automatically mean to be shamanistic, maybe except the tribal-national relations lead to such content.

19.

We participated in a neo-shamanic ritual in the capital, held, as appropriate in style, in a neighbourhood in the suburbs with yurts in it. Well-to-do clients had arrived, driving what, under local standards, were luxury cars, waiting for their owners in the car park in front of the modern yurt. The ritual was started only after dusk, as a strict rule. The International Centre for Mongolian Studies was the mediator between us and them. They referred us to the neo-shamans. So, the neo-shamans were waiting for us until we arrived. It was a trying task to find the place. The place of the performance appeared to be a stone building in the shape of a yurt with a beautiful wooden parquet floor. The shaman was visible in the middle, opposite the door. Clients sat on the floor close to the wall on both two sides. We found a seat opposite the altar, next to the door, from where we could observe the events in front of us.

20.

Later, we could only find orientation by ears because it was soon completely dark. Under the influence of the shaman's drumming, the middle-aged man entered into a trance state singing shamanic songs in the voice of a grandmother in the Darhat dialect of the Mongolian language. It was hard and almost impossible to understand the Darhat speech of the shaman by an average client with Khalkha origin from Ulaanbaatar, so an interpreter interpreted the shaman's singing for them and us. One by one, the clients went to the shaman with questions and problems concerning their private lives, to which the shaman most often responded theatrically, instructing them with harsh reactions. Some clients burst into tears in response and went back to their places trembling. At the end of the ritual, the shaman lit a cigarette, took off his heavy shamanic costume, and engaged in casual conversation with some of the client representatives. Everyone, both the shaman and clients, went home satisfied. We pondered whether this neo-shamanic ritual could be interpreted as music rather than a ritual. How would the deep bass tone of a shaman drum sound with the musical accompaniment of other Mongolian instruments, including small and big Buddhist bells and trombones?

21.

We then saw the museum created and maintained by the neo-shaman group. The museum can be found next door to the building where the ritual act was performed. The museum was a storehouse of all kinds of shamanic objects. Some of them were similar to original items, collected from the little houses without windows (alas) where shamanic attributes are kept after the death of shamans (as in Diószegi's case in Mongolia in 1960). Others were modern neo-Shamanic ornaments and tools. As with other museums with socialist context, one could observe an attempt to show objects in an evolutionist hierarchical time order. First, the ancient themes were presented, and then newer and newer ones, gradually moving in time ahead. The neo-shaman, the central figure during the seance, was also given a key role and special attention in the exhibition rooms. Most objects on display demonstrated his power. First, we did not have to pay for the entrance to the performance and the visit to the museum. The next day, however, they sent a bank account via SMS, respectfully asking us to transfer a predetermined amount onto it.

22.

We worked in the place of the International Association of Mongolian Studies several times. In this institute, we met neo-shamans from Ulaanbaatar who belonged to various ethnicities. Among others, a Buryat-Darhat young married couple told us about their experiences. The lady also held a divination ritual. She cleaned the space with fumigation. She then tried to fall into a trance by playing the mouth harp, but this time could not achieve it.

23.

In the corridor, photographs of the Association's life and history are exhibited, from which we could conclude that the International Association of Mongolian Studies plays an important role, even if indirectly, in fostering ideas of Turanist (pan-Mongol) kinship.

24.

And this is how we have arrived now to the question of the appearance of (Hungarian) Turanism in Mongolia. When and in what context does a Turanist range of interpretation arise, and what is its significance? This interpretive framework also applies to an additional topic. In a Mongolian approach, the pan-Mongolian ideas are expressed when the Buryat lama, Agvan Dorzhiev (1853–1938), appears on Buddhist altars. He was one of the prominent advocates of the idea calling for the unification of the common kinship (Buddhist), culture, and Mongolian peoples into a joint state. The appearance of Agvan Dorzhiev's image on Buddhist altars reminds us of the symbolic appearance of the pan-Mongolian movement today, its dominant role, and its place in Mongolian society.

25.

In local museums of Northern Mongolia, we explored the place of shamanism in contemporary Mongolian culture. While in Mörön, probably keeping in mind the expectations of international interest and scientific values, the topic of shamanism appears in several separate showcases, presenting shaman clothes and tools of different ethnicities, accompanied by English captions; in Bulgan, the seat of the neighbouring county, we did not perceive such manifestation. There, we could discover one or two shamanistic-looking objects, for example, a decorative arrow and a drum, during a consistent display of Buddhist themes, at most. With an object similar to the latter, shamans in the regions inhabited by Buryats west of Lake Baikal recovered the lost souls, as I have been able to observe during my visits to the Siberia collection of *Kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg in recent years.

26.

In addition, we gained insight into the mechanism for transferring epic traditions, singing techniques, and musical instruments between ethnicities in Mongolia. And we understood how the Turkic-speaking peoples of Inner Asia – though most of them are bilingual or completely Mongolised in Mongolia (Uriankhai, Darhat) today – have preserved their epic singing traditions based on throat singing.

27.

Among these peoples, epics are presented in Mongolian, but still by throat singing technique. In the case of the Khotogoits, we found that not exclusively the texts of the epics (such as the Jangar or the Gesar) were taken over from the neighbouring peoples, but the singing technique was acquired from them, too. Even though traces of kinship or language exchange were hardly, or not at all, detectable, the epic storytelling technique of the (neighbouring) Turkic peoples still had an impact on the local practice.

## NOTES

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