

SPIRITS IN TRANSITION
Shamanic Souls and Political Bodies in Northern Mongolia after State Socialism

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Introduction

Beginning in 1990, people in northern Mongolia experienced a veritable ontological meltdown, as the once immutable institutions of the socialist welfare state (such as infrastructure, health services, and education) gradually crumbled to dust. Crucially, this slow but relentless breakdown of the world as people had known it was not conceived of as merely a transformation from one political and economic system to another. Rather, with the advent of the so-called transition, people found themselves exposed to a violent intrusion of invisible forces, energies, and substances, which, during seventy years of socialism, had hovered only in the shadowy margins of self, household, community, and nation. As one man told me, it was as if all sorts of uninvited guests suddenly had crashed the gates of his compound (*hashaa*), forcing him to engage with all sorts of spiritual entities he had never quite believed in (*itgeh*), let alone shown any real interest in knowing about (*medeh*) before.

In fact, for many people in Ulaan-Uul – the remote district of Mongolia’s Hövsgöl province in which I conducted long-terms fieldwork in 1998-1999 - the hardships of transition had been made significantly worse, if not directly precipitated, by the communist repression of occult specialists in the late 1930s. The result was a postsocialist double bind, in which the aftershocks of the consecutive meltdowns of shamanic and socialist institutions came together, like two merging cracks in an erupting earthquake, to produce a general sense of chaos. On the one hand, the disappearance of the socialist state gave rise to a sense of occult excess. On the other hand, the lack of shamans meant that these opaque forces could not be tamed the way they used to be before the communists took over. Consequently, “transition society” – the messy amalgamation of predatory capitalism, a volatile democracy, a shambolic infrastructure, and runaway corruption - was not simply perceived as representing specific policies pertaining to a market economy and (neo)liberal reform, but was experienced instead as a sign, an index, indeed a portent of an all-encompassing cosmic upheaval, which people in Ulaan-Uul sometimes called “the age of darkness” (*haranhui üyie*).

Ulaun-Uul is situated in at heart of the homeland (*nutag*) of Mongolia’s Darhad minority, whose “shamanism” (*böö mörgöl*) has been a topic of significant scholarly interest for Mongolian, Soviet, Hungarian and French ethnographers since the early twentieth century. I was therefore more than a little disappointed when, when I began fieldwork in Northern Mongolia in the late 1990s, people told me that there were hardly any “genuine shamans” (*jinhene böö*) left to be found there anymore. Instead, as I eventually learned, the community in which I conducted most of my fieldwork was full of “half shamans” (*hagas böö*) or “fake shamans (*hudal böö*)” – a postsocialist

cohort of men and women in their twenties or thirties, who, due to a shortage of shaman teachers (*böö bagch*) caused by generations of repressive state socialism, were stuck in the process of becoming shamans - The problem about these incomplete shamans was that their presence was seen to signal an occult awakening whereby shamanic spirits that had largely left people alone during the socialist era, had increasingly begun interfering in peoples' lives with the advent of the “age of the market”. Thus people found themselves in the paradoxical situation that, at the same time as the shamans had largely disappeared, the spirits had come back. Above all, it was the annoying and dangerous abundance of potential shamans in the community that sparked the fear that too many shamanic spirits were on the loose, and that too little knowledge and skill were available to rein in this occult excess.

In Northern Mongolia around the turn of the millennium, then, it was not clear whether the deteriorating conditions of their own and other people’s lives were caused by restless shamanic spirits or by runaway market forces, nor did they always distinguish between the two. The only thing that was clear was that the chaos and misery, but also the hope and the freedom, characteristic of the time of transition were conditioned by invisible and unpredictable forces that took the labile, amorphous, and capricious shapes that characterize the spirit worlds mastered by Mongolia’s infamous Darhad shamans (*böö*). Yet, this “shamanism” was by no means limited to ideas and practices some might want to call “religious,” nor was it as a way of clothing the harsh political and economic realities of neoliberal structural reform and global capitalism in the soothing symbolic garb of a cultural tradition. In fact, as I argue on my recent monograph *Not Quite Shamans* (Pedersen 2011) shamanic agency was located above all in those persons who were *not* considered “real shamans,” whose occult capacities were located to only a limited extent in their own or indeed other human minds and bodies. Shamanic agency was also – and perhaps even predominantly - found in a bewildering wealth of nonhuman agents, such as vague presences and ephemeral atmospheres (a cool sensation in a hot room, a conspicuous silence between words); wild animals and plants (a mountain goat appearing in the shape of an old lady, a blueberry glowing in the dark); and particular things (a lone tree on a windswept grassland, a gift of meat from the hunt, a defunct electrical generator). Thus, for people in Ulaan-Uul, shamanism *was* transition (as opposed to being *about* it) in the late 1990s, namely, the labile and capricious way in which the world orchestrated itself.

This paper explores a certain cultural form through which this imbrication between shamanism and postsocialism in Northern Mongolia was played out especially vividly, namely humor. Indeed, Darhads are notorious jokers in Mongolia. They see themselves, and others see them, as having a superior sense of humor, and this widespread notion that Darhad persons are

inveterate jokers is inseparable from the equally widespread stereotype that all Darhads have with cunning shamanic powers. As one man told me, "There are two special things about Darhads: our ability to joke and our ability to curse." In Darhad joking about the spirits, I am going to argue, crude ethnic stereotypes merge with little-understood intricacies of shamanic cosmology, and a pristine space of ethnographic analysis is laid bare. For, in a community where no one is considered a genuine shaman, the displacements inherent to humor become emblematic to occult agency. Thus joking is as a way of acting shamanic without being a shaman: it is, so to speak, a vernacular mode of possession.

“These people joke about everything”

“These people joke about everything, so it is impossible to know when they are telling the truth (*üinen*) and when they are telling a lie (*hudal*).” Those were the words of young man from Ulaanbaatar, in whose jeep I once traveled to the Darhad *nutag*. He had just been departing from Ulaanbaatar in a brand new Russian GAZ jeep; it was his first visit to the Hövsgöl province. As we approached the area, he began expressing a number of practical concerns about progressing further, for the area is renowned for its truly awful roads and flooded rivers. It soon became clear, however, that his worries also stemmed from more intangible fears. “Is it true that the Darhads are prone to curse you?” he kept asking. “It is true that there are many shamanic spirits in the Darhad homeland?”

In the afternoon, he joined me on a visit to a friend of mine. A former director of a collective farm, and since 1990 chairman of the Ulaan-Uul branch of the Mongolian Peoples' Revolutionary Party, he was at this point a respected leader in the Ulaan-Uul community, renowned not only for his informed views on politics, but also for his staunchly materialist worldview. But, of course, the young driver from Ulaanbaatar driver knew none of this as we entered his *ger*. All he knew was that the old man was a Darhad and “looked terrifying with his huge, bushy beard” (as he later described his first impressions). After having got through the obligatory greetings between host and guests my friend directed his attention toward the rather timid-looking driver. Following some general warnings about the always imminent danger of *haraal*, he went on to say, in the mock-patronizing tone that is characteristic of some elderly Darhad men, "You must watch out while you are in the Darhad lands. The wilderness is full of restless souls and hungry bears. Shamans are abundant." Giggling, he then whispered: “In fact, I am myself a shaman!” At first, my driver responded lightly. After all, the old nomad was laughing, so what was the big deal? (as he told me later). But then, as the warnings became more explicit, so also my driver (and increasingly so myself) became less

certain. Was our Darhad host winding us up, or was he being earnest? This is (roughly) what he said:

So, I gather that you are going to sleep at Black Water [a river pool]. You better watch out for that place. It is full of *chötgör*. People avoid going there after dark. Once, a guy passed through in the middle of the night. Suddenly, his horse froze stock-still, but its head was dragged to the side, as if being pulled by something. When he saw that the same thing was happening to his dog, he understood that a water demon must be present. Humans cannot see them, but animals can. Why, you don't have a dog with you? Oh, I must lend you one of mine for the night. *Chötgör* are dangerous; they eat people's souls!

When we arrived at Har Us, just as the sun was setting over its dark waters, my driver exclaimed that he was too frightened to sleep there, and I found myself quite easily drawn to agree with him. This was despite the fact that, shortly after having made the above warning, our Darhad host had exploded into a fit of laughter: "Hey, I am lying!" (*hudal, hudal*, lit. "lies, lies")." The problem, however, was that it never became clear to my driver (or to me) what exactly our host had been joking about; that is to say, we were unable to determine precisely when our host had begun, and when he stopped, telling his shamanic "lies." "I just can't get my head around their minds (*uhaan üil hüre*h)," the man later complained over tea, echoing complaints that I was to hear again and again from non-Darhads. In fact, in Northern Mongolia at the time of my fieldwork, the preferred way of talking about shamanism often seemed to be joking. Not only did people deny the presence of "real shamans"; they also, as we just saw, keen on making jokes about people who were clearly not "real shamans," endlessly pointing out new persons (children included) while exclaiming, with suppressed giggles, "watch out, Morten, he is a shaman!" This might suggest that, in a community scarred by the past purges of its lamas and shamans, joking has acquired shamanic agency in its own right, and studying it not only tells something about the revival of shamanism in northern Mongolia since 1990; it also reveals something about the lasting impact of socialism on the spirits themselves.

In the late summer of 1999, I spent some eventful weeks on horseback traversing the early snow-clad hills of the Darhad homeland in pursuit of legends (*domog*) and anecdotes (*onigoo*) accompanied by a local friend. On more than one occasion immediately following a successful visit to a nomadic family, I would exclaim: "What a good storyteller that man was!" To which my friend's only retort was: "A bloody liar, that's what he is!" The man we had visited, I was then lectured with no little passion from the lad, had made it all up, for, "as everyone knows, he is a totally ignorant person!" Good anecdotes, I was let to understand, are only told by people who

know what they are talking about. It is not enough just to have a good imagination, for to imagine something is dangerously close to telling a lie (*hudal*), which is universally frowned upon. Instead, a good storyteller is someone who, precisely by knowing what he is talking about, is able to communicate this knowledge in an entertaining way. Perhaps that is why I failed so dramatically on the few occasions when I tried to tell a joke. The problem was not just that my (Danish) jokes were nearly impossible to translate. Even when I succeeded in conveying their meaning, people did not find them funny; indeed, they were quite taken back by their blatantly fictional nature. I was, sadly, considered not as a subtle joker (*shogch*) but a crude liar (*hudalch*), because instead of dramatizing a real event that might have happened, I was conjuring something up that could never have happened.

Thus, my friend carefully instructed, a proper *onigoo* always builds on a true (*üinen*) and concrete (*bodit*) event, which may well be delivered in a detailed (*nariin*) and hyperbolic (*hetrüüleleh*) fashion, but cannot contain any purely fictitious (*zohiomol*) or untrue (*hudal*) content. For the same reason, the concept of jokes (in the Euro-American sense) does not exist among Darhads, only anecdotes do—humorous narratives, which are based on real events or on events that can be imagined as real.¹ Also the structure of the *onigoo* differs substantially from Western jokes. While jokes are built up to facilitate sudden explosions of laughter during their narration (the punch-line), the *onigoo* is delivered with the aim of eliciting a trickle of mirth throughout its narration.

As in the case of gossip, a strong normative if not downright hostile undercurrent runs beneath the telling of anecdotes: they often include an element of critique, a certain “evaluative component” (Bergmann 1993, 8). Thus most *onigoo* involve a person or a group of persons who at some point did something wrong or stupid, of which the anecdote serves as a gentle, or not to gentle, reminder. This was made clear to me when I once asked my friend to tell me all the *onigoo* he knew. “Morten,” he said, “there is no way I can do that. All the anecdotes I know are about people who live here in the community or who used to live around here in the past, and imagine if they found or their relatives found out that you had been recording me telling these things about them!”

Let us now consider the joke songs (*shog duu*) or mocking songs (*hoshin duu*), as already described in several publications on Darhad cultural traditions (Badamhatan 1986, 145; Legrain

¹ According to Berger (1997, 153), “East Asian cultures, though they are full of the comic, have not cultivated the joke as has been the case in Europe and the Middle East.”

2001, 2007, 2008; Pegg 1991, 230–31).² Most Darhad people claim to know at least a couple of joke songs, and it is said that more than a thousand circulate in the Darhad homeland (Tsegmed 1992). Indeed, if you ask a person to talk about Darhad culture, he or she is most likely to tell you about these songs. Joke songs are used as entertainment at festive occasions like weddings, bank holidays (for example, International Women's Day), and the Lunar New Year. They are rarely heard outside such contexts; indeed, alcohol consumption seems to be a necessary prerequisite for their performance.

Most Darhad joke songs are comprised by two verses, each of four lines, with alliteration as the dominant principle of composition. Compared to other Mongolian songs, joke songs are short, and their performance is characterized by an unusual degree of speed in the intonation. Supposedly, much of their wittiness inheres in their subtle play on words as well as their clever alliterations. Still, practically all the joke songs I heard recounted the story of one or several really existing persons, who once did something embarrassing, stupid, or just plain wrong, and this anecdotal aspect clearly contributed to their wittiness. Darhad joke songs, in other words, are funny not only because of their amusing form, but also and especially because of their debasing content: someone is always laughed *at* when a joke song is performed. In that sense, we can think of them as a sort of congealed gossip: each verse in a joke song seem to corresponds to a certain information bit of slander that has been transformed into a poetic form. As G. Tsegmed, a well known Darhad intellectual and journalist, who is the author of two collections of joke songs (1992, 1998), explained to me,

in Halh songs, things are said directly (*shuud helchihej bairaa*). Darhad songs, on the other hand, always have a hidden meaning (*dald utgatai yom l daa*). If you speak in an open manner, it is inappropriate. For example, instead of telling someone that his shirt is dirty, we will sing a song about it. Not directly to him, but to someone else, and then the song goes round and round, so that, eventually, that person will learn about it. Such are the Darhad joke songs. They may seem to be folk songs (*ardyn duunuud*), but they always have authors who must however remain unknown. If you were to ask, people would reply, “Huh, I think I heard it at a wedding.” This may appear to be a superficial form of expression, but under the surface there is a deep truth.

During my time in the Ulaan-Uul district in the late 1990, I spent considerable time and energy searching for the “many old people” who, I had been told, knew “hundreds of joke songs.” I never found them. On the few occasions when a person did agree to perform a joke song for me, he or she

² Also known as *hoshin shog duu*. For a collection of joke songs, collected by Belgian ethnomusicologist Laurent Legrain with singers from the Darhad district of Renchinlümbe, please purchase *Chants du peuple Darxad*, Collection musiques populaires. Col CD 111, Colophon Editions, 2001.

would usually look for a printed version in order to “remember the words correctly” (copies of Tsegmed’s books can be found in practically every Ulaan-Uul household). In fact, new Darhad joke songs, which “under the surface” recall the (mis)deeds of contemporary persons, seldom seem to be composed anymore; people instead tend to reproduce the existing song repertoire, often by seeking explicit guidance in Tsegmed's books, which include detailed explanations of the songs’ origins in local lore.

This and other experiences led me to conclude that, at least in the Ulaan-Uul community, the joke song does not play the key role in as it once did in the organization of everyday life.³ Rather than referring to a recent past lived and experienced by the speakers as gossip always does (Bergmann 1993, 39), joke songs are increasingly being associated with more distant temporalities. Not only have a growing number of their victims passed away; there is also a sense that, while the actions of these persons have by no means been forgotten (or forgiven), today is not the time to assign guilt for mistakes carried out in a different era (*üye*), namely socialism. Having slowly ceased to be a dominant form of “social control” (Douglas 1968, 1993), the practice of joke singing has evolved into a professionalized and somewhat stale mode of remembering how life was a generation or two ago.

These are well-known developments in the postsocialist world. As demonstrated by Bruce Grant (1995), one of the cornerstones of Soviet cultural politics was the classification, reification, and celebration of different “nationalities” within the state socialist polity (see also Hirsch 2005). In the Mongolian version of this folklorization process, the so-called song tradition of each tribe seems to have played a central role (Bulag 1998, 27–41). One outcome of this process was the formalization of the role of the singer (*duuchin*). In every rural district, one found—and still finds today—a handful of people thus designated, who are the proud owners of medals and diplomas earned in song competitions held in Ulaanbaatar and sometimes even Moscow, in the socialist period.

The specific point to make here is that, among the Darhads and elsewhere in socialist Mongolia, these officially sanctioned ambassadors of indigenous culture were expected to perform mainly *local* songs, including, in this case, joke songs. The outcome of all this, it is now clear, is that the joke songs—alongside with shamanism—became emblematic of Darhad culture. Across Mongolia (and outside it, among Soviet and Hungarian ethnographers), for someone to be recognized as a real Darhad subject necessarily involved the mastering of joke songs (indeed, one

³ Still, the joke song tradition was apparently thriving in the Bayan-Zürh district south of the Shishged during the late 1990s (Gaelle Lacaze, personal communication), just as it is alive and well in the Renchinlümbe district, too (Laurent Legrain, personal communication).

senses that the more songs a person knows, the more Darhad he or she is deemed to be). In this regard, Tsegmed's publications, as well as my peoples' self-conscious attitude towards the joke songs, are products of a cultural reification process, whose specific style originates in state socialist cultural politics (including the power-knowledge effects of Soviet style ethnography) as much as in a specific cultural tradition. Having said that, it is clear that the joke songs may be employed as an effective "weapons of the weak" against the existing powers that be. Thus many of the joke songs that were invented back during state socialist period carried politically sensitive "hidden meanings" (to use Tsegmed's words), thus serving as an anonymous medium for expressing political critique.

Today, however, such explicitly subversive and unmistakably political appropriations of the joke song have more or less disappeared. Small wonder, for if some Darhad joke songs during the socialist period contained "hidden transcripts" that expressed "counter-revolutionary" sentiments (Humphrey 1994; cf. Scott 1990), then, today, there is little to hide anymore (of one's opinion about politics, that is). However, we shall see, joking plays a key role in shamanic possession ceremonies, where a sort of ritualized mocking, strikingly similar to joke singing, is gaining prominence.

Gossip spirits and other mischievous souls

As the noted scholar of Mongolian shamanism, Roberta Hamayon has pointed out, if praying is foregrounded in Buddhist (and Christian) ritual at the expense of playing, then, in shamanic rituals, it is the other way round: playing is here primary, even if praying is always to some degree present:

[T]he notion of playing is widely used to qualify the shaman's or the possessed individual's action towards the spirits, the latter's action towards the former, or both (Yakut *oyun*, Buryat *naadaxa*, Korean *nolda*, Hindi *k(h)elna*, etc.). All religious or ritual playing has been condemned by world religions on account of i[t] being opposed to praying. The notion of play encompasses the main features of the shaman's ritual behavior, while also indicating that he acts out a role, and is both "conscious and dupe" of this role (1993, 21–22).

Indeed, Buryat Mongolian shamans used to have a whole pantheon of "play spirits" (*naadamy ongon*), which were invoked in shamanic rituals mainly for "entertainment purposes." One liked to "collect" people's noses, another one their hats, and a third variety took a special interest in women's breasts (none of the spirits have names). Yet another one, known as Dobogoo Ovogoo ("Strict Old Man"), was looking for his wife, whom he feared to be sleeping around. And he was

rightly concerned, for the wife, Samsakhai, enquired every man in the audience about the size of his “stick.” (Hangalov 1958, 476–82).

The Darhads have no such pantheon of play spirits. Nevertheless, there is a lot of play – and joking – in Darhad shamanic rituals. Not only do some spirits occasionally make fun of clients and the audience, but people may also sometimes laugh at them. When asked about these matters, Nadmid Udgan, the Darhad shaman who was my main interlocutor on these matters, tied to play down the significance. “It is the spirits themselves—not the shamans—that make people laugh,” Nadmid said, because, she elaborated, “a real shaman will be without consciousness after the spirits come” (*ongon oroh üyed jinhene böö hün uhaangüi baidag*). According to Nadmid Udgan, spirits that “like to say funny things” are collectively known as the “gossip spirits” (*hobooch ongod*). Let me now recall one of the shamanic rituals in which I participated in the Ulaan-Uul’s neighbouring district of Tsagaan Nuur, namely the so bi-annual “awakening” of the shamanic spirit called Father of Harmai.

It was well past midnight on a cool summer night, and, as usual, Nadmid Udgan's small wooden barn was packed with visitors. A number of *ongod* (shamanic spirits) had already possessed her, and a corresponding number of clients had been healed (*zasah*, lit. “fixed”). A number of funny incidents had already taken place. At one point, a prominent businessmen who had travelled all the way (1000 km) from the national capital of Ulaanbaatar in his Land Cruiser to expel an attack of malicious gossip (*hel am*), had been summoned by the Father of Harmai himself, and much mirth had arisen from his ignorance in dealing with the spirits. Despite the fact that the man was visibly distraught he was not spared. In fact, the more concerned the man had looked, the more people had laughed.

While the previous spirits had all differed in their manifestations in Nadmid Udgan's body, it was the *ongon* that now “entered” (*ongoh*) that was to stand out the most. This was Dersegiin Yum, the only of Nadmid Udgan's shamanic spirits that did not have its spatial abode in the Darhad homeland and which was not considered to be a “soul” (*süns*) of an ancestral Darhad shaman. For the same reason, Dersegiin Yum was considered to be the most “light” (*hüngiin*) of all shamanic spirits. This ephemeral nature of the spirit also seemed to be expressed in its name (Dersegiin Yum = Grassy Thing), and I heard several tales in which shamans “turned themselves into grass” (*dersnii toogoor bolchihdog*) and thereby escaped impinging dangers from the outside, such as Communist cadres.

Now, rather than holding her drum in the common upright position, and dancing in slow, repetitive semicircles, Nadmid Udgan, when seized by Dersegiin Yum, awkwardly pushed the drum horizontally away from her body, and began rotating round and round, while drumming ever more

violently. This, judging from peoples' response, was extremely funny. Meanwhile, the shrill and rather menacing voice of the spirit filled the air, communicating the name of the person in the audience it was looking for. According to the "interpreter," who listened to the "words spoken" for a good while, this person was a timid-looking adolescent girl, seated behind her parents in the far corner of the room, as if hiding. Plainly terrified, the girl was now guided to the center of the *hoimor*, where the obligatory drumstick divination (*törög hayah*) was initiated. The shaman is supposed to throw her drumstick three times onto the seam of the kneeling client's *deel*, using the side (*tal*) facing up as a tool for determining the latter's destiny (*zaya*). Each time, the client must hand the drumstick back to the shaman, while saying the words: *törög, törög*. In this particular case, however, nothing was uttered. The girl's own family and others tried to encourage her ("come on now, just say *törög, törög!*"), but to no avail. In response, the shaman/spirit started pecking, bird-like, at the sulking figure on the floor, as if confused about what do to with such a reluctant person. Everyone was laughing but the girl herself. Eventually, she managed to whisper the required words. However, the mocking was far from over. The shaman/spirit now bent down, and, by provocatively putting her ear right next to the girl's mouth, made it clear that the latter had not spoken loud enough. Eventually, the girl was forced to repeated the words, this time somewhat louder but also more hysterically. This made the shaman jump up, begin rotating and drumming again, and scream, in mocking imitation of the girl's quivering voice: "*törög, törög, HI HI HI, törög, törög, HA HA HA.*"

Finally, the *zasal* proper could begin. Forcing the girl's head down into praying gesture (*dooshoo mörgöh*), Nadmid Udgan howled: "*baahan, baahan bartsad baina aa!*" ("big, big obstacle!"). The poor girl was now subjected to a sustained whipping with the drumstick, which was followed by the shaman/spirit complaining loudly: "How can someone like you, who is so young, already have lost five years of your life? To an old person, even five days are precious, and now look at you! *Baahan, baahan.*" The girl was weeping as she was led away. Everyone else was overwhelmed by laughter. And the fun was not over, for Dersegiin Yum now started insulting people in the audience at random (or so it seemed). One of the spirits's songs, for example, insinuated that two people from the Tsagaan Nuur village had been "taking walks in the hills" together (had had an affair). As one might expect, this sparked another explosion of laughter in the audience, and especially so since one of the purported lovers was sitting there with them, accompanied by his increasingly angry-looking wife. Soon after, the spirit departed from Nadmid Udgan.

Apparently, Dersegiin Yum always behaves in this manner. According to Nadmid Udgan, this spirit likes to stick its nose into everything (*yummy dunduur oroh*, lit. "to go between things"). Or,

as she described it with an apt image, Dersegiin Yum “is a bit like a tape recorder. It stores people’s conversations and then replays them elsewhere.” This, Nadmid stressed, is what all gossip spirits do: they “imitate people’s bad things” (*muu yumyg l duuraina*), having previously recorded and “stored” (*tatah avah*) these under other, more private circumstances. Dersegiin Yum, then, is an obscene figure, which - not unlike the feared “half shamans” (*hagas böö*) whose shamanic potential have never been realized due to a fatal lack of shamanic teachers (Pedersen 2011: 81-114), confronts people with tabooed matters that are never talked about. And that, not surprisingly, elicits laughter.

Although gossip spirits are considered “light” in comparison with more “heavy” (*hünd*) ancestral spirits with genealogical associations with prominent Darhad clans, and although people may therefore laugh in their presence, they can be invoked for serious and sometimes sinister purposes. For example, a family may ask a shaman to send a gossip spirit to the home of their affines (*nagach*) to check how their newly wed daughter is doing. Or, if you happen to be a shaman yourself, you might want to send a gossip spirit to the home of another shaman to spy on the secret things (*nuuts yum*) that may be taking place there. In either case, the spirit will “store everything exactly as it takes place,” and then later copy or imitate (*duuraina*) it for you, just like Dersegiin Yum did above. Finally, gossip spirits may also interfere directly in social relationships, for example by manipulating people’s attraction to one another. Indeed, giggled Nadmid Udgan, they sometimes make married couples separate from one another and then form new pairs, “just for the fun of it.”

Gossip spirits, all this suggests, are the most plastic of all *ongod*. For one thing, they are at the bottom of the ancestral hierarchy of shamanic spirits: the fact that they designated as “things” (*yum*) indicates that they lack the pedigree of clannish “Father” and “Mother” spirits. Secondly, most gossip spirits, and, the shamans mastering them, are female. Finally, and inseparable from their non-ancestral and feminized characteristics, gossip spirits are imbued with a hyper-fluid nature. Unlike other *ongod*, they are truly omnipresent. Thus, gossip spirits do not need the bodies of different zoomorphic spirit helpers to travel as other spirit guardians do. Rather, they move around entirely freely. In fact, perhaps we should think of these occult entities simply *as* gossip: just like gossip, and for that matter joke songs, they consist of detachable units of authorless talk in constant movement from one social realm to another. It is true that, like other shamanic spirits, they can only speak through the bodies of shamans (who, as it were, act as “loudspeakers”). But, as Nadmid Udgan giggled, “there is always the possibility that a gossip spirit is listening to what you are saying!”

This is substantiated by the fact that once, when the two of us were discussing the gossipy personality of Soli Yum, Nadmid Udgan jokingly remarked, “So, the name of this *ongon* reflects what it does!” She was probably referring to the polysemic term *solia*, which means “exchange,” “barter,” “mixture,” “insanity,” as well as, indeed, “rotation”. Also think again of Dersegiin Yum's strange performance. When possessed by this spirit, Nadmid Udgan was spinning round and round, as if to emphasize that what it *said* had the same “insane” form. Dersegiin Yum was rotating, because that is what this and other gossip spirits are felt to be: forms of exchange, or *solia*, whose essential mode of being is to be always moving (like the postsocialist market), and in so doing reconfigure their surroundings by “causing new things to mix” (as Nadmid Udgan put it), as when couples dissolve to form new partnerships, or secrets (and daughters-in-law) flow from one domestic unit to another.

Thus the funniness of gossip spirits is inseparable from their plastic ontology. This might also explain why many Darhads seem to think of these spirits as having obscene “personalities”. Not unlike the Buryat “play spirits” (as well as, according to the prevailing ethnic stereotype in postsocialist Mongolia, the Darhads themselves), the gossip spirits happily break the strongest taboos, just as they unashamedly let the worst and most embarrassing secrets out into the open. But there is also a deeper sense in which gossip spirits are comical. Consider, again, Dersegiin Yum's funny (*shogch*) manifestation in Nadmid Udgan’s body. The reason why people were laughing, I suggest, is that this particular performance constituted an “impossible form.” Dersegiin Yum’s possession of Nadmid Udgan was comical, I suggest, not only because gossip spirits, as the most marginal *ongod*, say and do funny things, but also because it made visible within one realm of reality (the shaman’s body) what is otherwise restricted to another realm (the talk of gossip). Thus understood, Dersegiin Yum’s dance was “necessarily funny,” for a comical shape was the only possible—or could we say impossible-form that this plastic being could assume in a body. In short, this and other gossip spirits’ ritual actualizations emerge as visualizations of what gossip might look like.

In summary, what I am suggesting is that, when Dersegiin Yum possessed Nadmid Udgan, her shamanic dance amounted to a “doomed” attempt to arrest something non-arrestable, or represent something non-representable, namely the endless flow of gossip in the Tsagaan Nuur community. In fact, could the same point be made about all Nadmid Udgan’s spirit manifestations, whether material, performative, or discursive: perhaps they all offered a comical view into the inherent paradoxes of the Darhad shamanic cosmos; they were, in that sense, a sort of objectified jokes? Certainly, there is a sense to which shamanic spirits are comical almost by definition – one could, so to speak, classify them as “theoretically funny. For from revolving around a reduction of

dimensions around a focal point of balance as in the case of the Buddhist *mandala* aesthetics (Snellgrove 1987), shamanic art is all about the explosion of dimension and the proliferation of asymmetries via deliberate acts of misbalancing and decentering. That is, instead of trying to hide that any depiction of the spirits will necessarily amount to an incomplete version of their ephemeral nature, shamanic art, like all comedy, aims to make this incongruity—this failure of representation—as *apparent* as possible. On this interpretation, which I shall now substantiate, play is what the spirits *are*: inherently labile agents of change in a state of permanent transformation or, indeed, transition.

Shamanic Humor

I have now discussed the key role of joking and comedy in Darhad shamanic rituals. Yet, as noted earlier, joking also plays a vital role in more everyday contexts, where Darhad persons often joke when talking about the spirits. This "shamanic humor" represents a considerable methodological and epistemological challenge. If people are joking when communicating their occult knowledge, what is the status of this knowledge from an anthropological—and from an indigenous—point of view? Is it true or is it false? Do such utterances reflect peoples' beliefs – do people mean what they say about shamanic affairs? And, more generally, what might the widespread practice of shamanic humor tell us about the imbrication between shamanism and postsocialism in contemporary Mongolia?

Consider the following sample from a conversation I once overheard inside the forge of Gombodorj, a well-known Darhad blacksmith and hunter. Two visitors were present, a young herdsman and an elderly driver. Gombodorj was busy polishing a knife, when the following exchange took place:

Herdsman: I just went hunting. Returned today.

Driver: Where did you go?

Herdsman: To Mungarag Taiga.

Gombodorj: Mungarag Taiga, huh. Did you kill something?

Herdsman: Actually, I did. A roebuck.

Driver: Well, well, that is good.

Gombodorj [serious]: The Mungarag Taiga is dangerous.

Herdsmen: Yeah?

Gombodorj: It is full of *ongod*. I do hope the roebuck wasn't female?

Herdsmen: It was...!

Gombodorj: Female roebuck are very dangerous to hunt. You need to know how to distinguish between those with a spirit master (*ezen*) from those without one. If you happen to kill the one with an *ezen*, it could be very bad for you. The *ezen* may become angry and cause trouble for you and your family!

Herdsmen: It is true that my father used to tell me that the Ulaan Taiga has many *ongod*. But I always thought that the Mungarag Taiga was different.

Gombodorj [still serious]: I know this better than your father. Mungarag Taiga is full of *ongod*. Watch out if the roebuck stares back at you. It happened to me once, I was so afraid.

Driver [laughing]: You must be kidding! (*Hudal, hudal*, lit. "A lie, a lie").

Gombodorj [now smiling cunningly]: It is true. It means that it is cursing you! You must then kill it in a clean shot, or face the *ezen*'s wrath. This is why only skilled hunters should prey on the roebuck. To others, it is too dangerous.

Herdsmen: That I have never heard before!

Driver: Hey, don't you worry; he is just making fun (*shogloh hiih*).

Gombodorj [laughing now]: Mungarag Taiga is full of *ongod*; female roebuck are extremely dangerous.

[The herdsman now looks even more perplexed]

Gombodorj [deadpan]: You'd better visit a shaman now! Perhaps the roebuck cursed you! Don't sleep with your wife ... Ha, Ha, Ha ... I am just talking lies! (*hudal yarih*).

Driver: It is true, though. Once, when I was driving out in the east, I met a man who told me that ... [and here he began another story about masters].

What is going on here? On the one hand, Gombodorj cannot mean what he is saying, for, if so, why is he telling his interlocutors that he is “lying”? On the other hand, his intention cannot be to lie either, for why then does he not hide this fact? A lie, after all, “only succeeds if the other participants do not know that it even happened” (Barbe 1995, 117). Gombodorj, we are thus led to conclude, did *not not* mean what he was saying (Willerslev 2004, cf. Schechner 1985). That is, he was being ironic. According to the classic definition, irony is to say the opposite of what one means: the speaker “figuratively” means the opposite of what he “literally” says (Barbe 1995, 62). Yet, while this comprises those instances where two opposite meanings can be identified in the semantics of a sentence, it neglects what linguists refer to as the pragmatic context of utterances, which is often necessary for the identification of an ironic speaker intention: the tone of voice, the conversational implicature, the relationship between the speaker and the listener, and so forth (Barbe 1995, 34–59). Indeed, much of Gombodorj’s “lying” was conveyed through non-semantic cues like cunning smiles and laughter (represented in the square brackets in the above extract), which served pragmatically to differentiate some of his utterances from others. Another problem about classical irony theory is that not all ironic utterances have opposite meanings. Therefore, pragmatic theories play down the distinction between the figurative and the literal, and focus on the propositional attitude of ironic utterances: the speaker’s intention with what he says, and the interlocutor’s ability to detect this attitude (Barbe 1995, 73–92). On this analysis, my role as a listener was not to decipher the meaning of what Gombodorj said in his forge but his intentions with saying it.

The question remains, however, what is the epistemological status of shamanic humor? For cognitive anthropologists like Dan Sperber, the answer might be that shamanic humor, like symbolic forms of language more generally, conveys different degrees of belief on behalf of speakers (1985). In the case of Gombodorj’s irony, it was in this sense impossible for us as listeners to decide whether he was “using” (conveying his own belief) or “mentioning” (citing someone else’s belief) his utterances; that is, we were unable to determine if he was pretending or whether he

was sincere (1995, 45–51; Clark and Gerrig 1984; Sperber and Wilson 1981, 315). Ironic utterances, according to this radically pragmatic interpretation, are thus not genuine propositions, but “semi-propositions.” Instead of representing the world, irony is all about representing other representations, thus turning ironic utterances into tools for communicating one’s beliefs about other beliefs. If, for example, someone makes the sarcastic remark “how democratic!” in response to a blatantly authoritarian decision, this should be analyzed as an indirect citation (“echoic mention”) of a real or imagined scenario, where someone “uses” this utterance to make a genuine proposition (express a belief).

Now if we follow this line of thought to its conclusion, it implies that shamanic humor is not about the spirits at all, but only about communicating a certain attitude about others’ beliefs in them. However, I find it unlikely that when people in Northern Mongolia “speak lies” about the spirits, they are merely expressing beliefs about other peoples’ beliefs. This would imply that people like Gombodorj do not take the spirits seriously at all, and that is clearly not an accurate description of his and other “half shamans”’ awkward yet intimate relationship to the shamanic cosmos. A much more satisfactory interpretation, it seems to me, would be to say that when Darhads “speak lies” about the spirits, then they are both representing a genuine belief in (making a proposition about) these metaphysical entities *and* communicating a meta-representational attitude towards (making a semi-proposition about) this belief. On this interpretation, then, shamanic humor is a tool for communicating relative beliefs in spirits and other occult phenomena, for by reflexively referring (as “echoic mention”) to itself while also denoting (as “propositional use”) the shamanic cosmos, Gombodorj’s “lies” about spirits in Mungarag Taiga inserted a nested doubt into his utterances.

Indeed, we may differentiate between two kinds of such shamanic doubt in Northern Mongolia, both of which are connected to the dramatic social, cultural, and political changes that Mongolia has been subject to over the past century or more. On the one hand, there is widespread epistemological doubt about shamanism as a tradition of cosmological knowledge, inasmuch as the present-day shamans are not considered particularly knowledgeable, let alone particularly trustworthy. On the other hand, some people (though by no means everyone) also harbor doubt whether the spirits exist or not. While such skepticism is not new in Mongolia (Humphrey 1996, 361–64), both forms of shamanic doubt seem to have proliferated during socialism. In fact, it is likely that state socialist cultural politics created the very ironic attitude towards the shamanic spirits, which is expressed in contemporary Darhad practices of “speaking lies.” After all, the “primitive and cunning shamans of the past” were persistently among some of the most popular targets of satire in the propagandistic plays about Mongolia’s “reactionary” and “feudal” history

that were staged by state-sponsored theatre troupes in the "houses of culture" (*soyolyn töv*), which could be found across Mongolia during socialist times, including in remote districts like Ulaan-Uul (Marsh 2006).⁴

Compelling as this interpretation is, it fails to taken into account that cultural politics always have unintended, and often subversive, effects. This is precisely what appears to have happened in the present case. Ironically, the propagandistic satire staged in Ulaan-Uul's "house of culture" thus represented the only public space in which shamanism could be practiced during socialism. In an ethnographic film (Merli 2000), a Darhad shaman recounts how, back during the 1970s, he was part of a traveling theater troupe that performed politically correct shows in the "houses of cultures" scattered across the Mongolian countryside. Due to his ethnicity, he was always assigned to play the same role of a stupid and egoistic shaman, who always lost his wits and went into trance. But, actually, the man was not acting, for he *did* become possessed by spirits while on stage; indeed the only way he could respond to his shamanic calling was by pretending to pretend that he was a shaman!⁵

This example shows that irony not only can be used in the interest of the powers that be (for the Communists to make fun of the "superstitious" shamans), but also the other way around. More precisely, shamanic humor emerges as a slightly distorted version of – or unintended subversive play on – the state propaganda' satirical message that shamanism is false. For, as demonstrated by the Darhad shaman who pretended to pretend, the ironic format of political and religious satire can be used to communicate, not just a skeptical (semi-propositional) attitude towards beliefs about spirits in line with official state discourse, but also genuine (propositional) beliefs in them, disguised as mockery! Still, we are not quite there yet. For what if people simply stopped being aware or at least ceased caring about whether they were believing in the Communist propaganda or not? "Virtually [everyone] had a double life," observes Humphrey (1994, 25), for the best way to remain sane in the face of mounting contradictions between ideology and practice was to assume the characteristically dual or cynical perspective, which became a trademark of the last Soviet generation. The result, as "native" philosophers like Zizek have suggested, was that an average citizen in state socialist societies stopped being aware of the fact that he pretended. As this "cynical reason"(1993) became routinized as a way of life, people started to forget when they were

⁴ Apparently, in Soviet Siberia, "antireligious authorities considered the words *shaman* and *deceiver* to synonymous" (Balzer 2006: 85).

⁵ Piers Vitebsky also describes how, "[i]n theatres across Siberia, shallow re-enactments of shamanic trances were staged as a special set piece in dramas. There were professional actors who specialized in this, and one of them told me how he sometimes felt dangerously on the edge of real trance, which he would not have been competent to handle" (2005: 231-232)

pretending and when they were not – they not only stopped believing, but also disbelieving (see Yurchak 2006). If we apply these findings on the Darhad context, then a number of new riddles arise. For one thing, if shamans did not know whether they were pretending or not during socialism, how can they know now, if they were pretending or not back then? Also, and even more disturbingly, how can the Darhad shamans (and their clients) know if they are pretending or not, *today*? My attempt to explain shamanic humor as an expression of relative belief in Sperber's sense has, it seems, been caught up in same infinite regress, which characterizes ironic signification as a whole.

Shamanic truth

One possible way out of this impasse is to turn the question of relativity on its head: perhaps it is not Darhad peoples' beliefs about the shamanic spirits that are relative, but rather the internal organization of the shamanic cosmos itself? That is, is irony a playful dimension that is added on to a reality existing independently of play, as Sperber would have it, or could irony instigate a vantage that, by virtue of its playfulness, offers a view to otherwise invisible dimensions of the world? According to the first interpretation, shamanic humor is an ironic semi-proposition (that is neither true nor false) that ambiguously refers to a proper proposition or genuine belief (which is either true or false) about the world of reality outside play. On the latter interpretation, Gombodorj's "lies" bespeaks an occult dimension of reality, which cannot be talked about by means of propositions of the kind used to represent people's beliefs in the earnest. Here, the invisible world of the shamanic spirits is a play-world, and the point of shamanic joking – and, more generally, ritual laughter and play – is to stage play-frames which enables humans to participate in the cosmic game (*naadam*) that the spirits play. So, which one is it? As Johan Huizinga shows in *Homo Ludens* (1970), the answer boils down to which of two dimensions, that of play and that of the earnest, encompasses the other:

The signification of “earnest” is defined by and exhausted in the negation of “play” – earnest is simply “not-playing” and nothing more. The significance of “play,” on the other hand, is by no means defined or exhausted by calling it “not-earnest” or “not serious.” Play is a thing by itself. The play concept as such is of higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness. (1970, 65)

From Huizinga's perspective, then, Gombodorj's playful "lies" should therefore not be analyzed through a conventional (naturalist, cognitivist) model of representation, according to which propositions (in ideal terms) are supposed to be either true or false. Instead, Darhad shamanic

humor emerges as a form of discursive play, whose truth-status should be compared with other, non-discursive forms of play, as opposed to, as Sperber would have it, the truth-status of more earnest forms of discursive non-play. On the face of it, shamanic humor would thus represent an example of what Michael Taussig calls "epistemic murk" (1987, 121). For him, the important thing about the poetic and often joking language employed by the shamans and healers studied by him in his influential work *The Imbrication between Shamanism and Colonialism in Latin America* (1987) is that it is not imprisoned by the "fixity of meaning," which, according to "Western fictions," is required to form "true propositions." Unlike the liturgy-heavy rituals of the Catholic church, the "sorcery-centered religious mythology" of Amerindian shamans celebrates the irreducible fluidity of all signification processes by staging "Dada-like pandemonium[s] of the senses," during which there "is no way of separating the whirling confusion of the prolonged nausea from the bawdy jokes and teasing elbowing for room in the *yagé* song's irresistible current, with neither an end nor beginning nor climactical catharses but just bits and pieces in a mosaic of interruptedness." (1987, 412).

According to this (for lack of a better word) postmodernist account, the "lack of fixity of meaning" in Darhad shamanic humor is an end in itself: Irony renders the perspectives of different persons or groups of persons mutually relative, for the multiplication of points of view implicated by the "explosion" of the enunciator's subject are all equally valid representations of the same world. Accordingly, shamanic humor is here posited as relative in an "epistemological" way: all the different points of view are positively true, but only insofar as each such perspective, negatively, or could we say solipsistically, is confined to a singular speaker or group of speakers. Conversely, according to the alternative interpretation I now want to present, the truth of shamanic humor is posited to be relative in an "ontological" way: the different points of view instigated by "speaking lies" are all equal in their failure to represent the spirits, yet this negativity bespeaks, positively, or deictically, the existence of multiple worlds. Which is why, on the analysis to follow below, talking about the shamanic spirits *must* take a playful form, for such is also the form of these spirits *themselves*.

Irony, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, is "infinite absolute negativity. It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not" (1989: 261). This concept of irony, I suggest, allows us to better understand how Gombordorj's shamanic humor works. "Speaking lies" compels both listeners and speakers to adapt an "infinite absolutely negative" stance towards the nature of the shamanic cosmos. In the same way as Nadmid Udgan's possession by Dersegiin Yum was a doomed attempt to render visible

what cannot be made visible (namely the flow of community gossip) , shamanic humor renders it all too apparent that the shamanic spirits cannot be spoken about by means of ordinary representational language. Thus understood, shamanic humor is not a way of communicating degrees of belief (and therefore doubt) about occult phenomena, but an actualization, in the medium of language, of their inherently capricious mode of being. Thus the phenomenon of “speaking lies” is not a question of representation at all. In fact, it makes perfect sense that shamanic humor takes the ironic form it does, for this "impossible form" of speech alone, is isomorphic with the plastic way of being of shamanic spirits. If, say, one wants communicate one’s knowledge about the gossip spirit Dersegiin Yum, then this quite logically calls for the use of a playful discursive genres like irony for playful (*naadah*) is exactly the nature of these spirits themselves. Instead of expressing doubt about the spirits, shamanic humor thus emerges as an “impossible” discursive orchestration of them: the radical pragmatics of ironic speech replicates the invisible state as the *ongod*, which is movement itself.

On this alternative interpretation, the lack of fixity of meaning in ironic discourse emerges a means rather than an end in itself: when people speak ironically, they are attempting to convey a particular state of affairs pertaining to the world and/or themselves rather than emptying out the possibility of making such ontological claims. For instead of resulting in “epistemic murk”, as someone Taussig would have it, shamanic humor thus allows one to enact in speech the disturbing affect that it is the cosmos *itself* that is relative, not people’s representations of it. This shamanic concept truth does not involve a conventional cultural relativist decentering, where all perspectives are seen as equally valid in epistemological terms. Rather, we seem faced with a concept of "natural relativism" or “multi-naturalism,” to borrow a neologism from Viveiros de Castro’s work on Amazonian animism (1998). In Darhad practices of “speaking lies," the lack of a fixed center is positivized as the simultaneous enacting of multiple points of view becomes a way –the only way – of grasping a cosmos which is inherently labile and multiple. Rather than doubt about the existence of spirits, then, what is nested in shamanic humor is the deictic, multi-naturalist nature of the spirits themselves.

The shamanic enigma that spills over from possession rituals into more everyday contexts through the practice of “telling lies," then, is not so much the question of *whether* the spirits exist, but more a question of *where* these invisible beings are at a given moment in time, or a given point in space. After all, as we saw in the account of Nadmid Udgan’s possession rituals, the spirits are only true in play, and shamanic humor can, in that sense, be interpreted as a sustained attempt on behalf of the enunciating subject to express via the medium of speech the inherently paradoxical or playful nature of this cosmos. So, to return to my example from Gombodorj’s forge, what he was

conveying was that Mungarag Taiga is both haunted and not haunted, not either haunted or not haunted. Were I to have believed that it is always haunted, I would have made the same mistake as many Halh visitors to the Darhad homeland, who – not unlike the postmodernists –take the invisible underneath of things to be always equally present. Had I, on the other hand, assumed that the place is never haunted, I would have made the opposite (naturalist) mistake of overlooking that, among the Darhads, everything is potentially more than it seems. But, were I to have taken his joking seriously *as* irony, I might have realized that what Gombodorj was trying to tell us was that *ongod* are always on the move, floating from one place, thing or person to the next, like ocean froth caught in the wind.⁶

Conclusion

In closing this analysis, I would like to emphasize that I take very seriously the earlier discussed possibility that “speaking lies” is the result of a semi-conscious internalization of state-orchestrated Communist cultural politics, for this certainly is plausible in light of the complex relations between the socialist (and, before that, Buddhist) rulers and local shamanic actors. Indeed, this “postsocialist” account of shamanic humor and the “multi-naturalist” account that I just presented above may be considered complementary as opposed to mutually exclusive—each account may be said to provide the invisible theoretical subtext needed for the other account to work. It follows that the question is not how do make a (false) choice between “cultural” and “political” explanations of phenomena like “speaking lies,” but how to transcend—or transgress—such contrasting analytical perspectives. In that sense, an ethnographically and theoretically satisfactory account of Darhad shamanic humor must be one that is able to demonstrate that this practice is indeed an outcome of northern Mongolia’s recent political history, while in the same breath making it perfectly clear that the deeply postsocialist nature of “speaking lies” does not make this practice any less shamanic for that.

Kierkegaard famously wrote that, in certain situations, humor is the *incognito* of religion (1963, 177–99). In fact, he went as far as maintaining that “there is nothing as faithfully guarded by the comical as the religious” (1963, 167). As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, there are (at least) two ways in which joking had become the “incognito of shamanism” in Northern Mongolia in the late 1990s. The first sense involves the fact that many Darhads tended to joke when talking about shamanic affairs, especially in a place like Ulaan-Uul with its lack of so-called “genuine

⁶ In adopting this particular metaphor, I have in mind Henri Bergson's observation that "Laughter indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. ... Like [ocean] froth, it sparkles...But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter" (1999: 178-179).

shamans.” But there is also another sense to which joking became the incognito of shamanism in postsocialist Northern Mongolia, namely insofar as the Darhads, without being aware of it, so to speak, have remained socialist subjects by keeping on pretending to pretend to believe in the shamanic spirits, even if there is no communist cadres left to tell them to do so. In both senses, the Mongolian postsocialist legacy, through a complex amalgamation of intended and unintended effects, has enhanced the power of the Darhad shamanic spirits by rendering them even more labile, and ever more multiple, in perfect anticipation, as it were, of the times of permanent transition to come.

Instead of instigating doubt about the spirits, then, the socialist heritage of “speaking lies” has allowed Darhad shamanism to reinvent itself in the context of postsocialist transition; in fact, it could be maintained that the shamanic tradition has become even more powerful than ever before *because* of its awkward relationship with socialism. Thus, what emerges on the other side of this paper’s preoccupation with linguistic details and cosmological intricacies is a bigger message, namely that joking is a key form of social agency in the hinterlands of Mongolia. In a community where no one has the capacity to be a genuine shaman, everyone is a potential shaman insofar as he or she makes funny jokes about this very lack. As a result, every Darhad person in effect has become imbued with occult agency. A quintessentially postsocialist ironic genre in which everyone (but especially wanna-be shamans like Gombodorj) are quoting real or imaginary Darhad others, shamanic humor repeatedly undermines peoples’ sense of what and where the shamanic spirits might be. Yet, paradoxically, it does so in a way that only serves to strengthen the spirits’ grip over their lives.

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