

Study of Khorchin Shamanic Attire and Implement

Chaobo Yang

PhD candidate in Art Studies, School of Fine Arts and Technology, Mongolian National University of Education, Ulaanbaatar City, Mongolia

Abstract: Drawing on extensive fieldwork and a critical review of textual sources, this article offers a systematic typological and symbolic analysis of the ritual functions, attire, and implements of the four categories of shamans in Khorchin, Inner Mongolia-khondon, Shamanic, laichin, and gürdem. The study demonstrates that Khorchin shamanic material culture fuses nomadic traditions, Buddhist influences, and memories of classical Mongolian shamanism. Core garments-through colour, movement, and sound-construct a mediating space for dialogue between humans and spirits, while the ritual instruments together form a comprehensive technology of healing and exorcism. By unpacking the materials, structures, and symbolic meanings of each group’s costume and tools, the article shows that these material forms are crucial to understanding both the composite nature of Khorchin rites and their contemporary persistence. It also reveals “yellow-oriented” and “new” shamanic types that emerge from the intersection of Buddhist vocabulary and traditional shamanic belief, highlighting the dynamic evolution of Mongolian religious culture. Tracing the cultural suturing of Gelug Buddhist language with steppe magic since the seventeenth century, the study illustrates how material culture and visual communication strategies converge to create new modes of self-representation. Finally, it proposes a three-part analytical lens-ritual-material-memory-that offers fresh theoretical and methodological insights for examining Mongolian folk religion under combined forces of globalisation and localisation, and for revitalising intangible heritage in pastoral regions.

Keywords: Khorchin Shamanism, Costume Symbolism, Ritual Implements, Material Culture, Buddhist Influence.

1. Khorchin Shamanic Attire

According to Shaman Erdenebulag, an oral tradition tells that the Eternal Heaven (also called the Buddha) commanded the guardian spirits (ongod) to descend to the human world and relieve people of their suffering, curing their illnesses. Yet after the spirits arrived, their power swelled: they unleashed showers of stones, snow, and hail, bringing disaster to humankind. Angered, the Eternal Heaven arranged a great contest on the Snow-White Mountain, pitting Himself against the spirits; the Khorchin spirit Khovogtoi joined the struggle as well. In the midst of the contest, Khovogtoi’s garments caught on a tree, were ripped to shreds, and became a mantle of tasselled strips. Later generations called these strips the “wings” of the Khorchin shaman-an element of costume that has been handed down to this day. The “dalavch” (“wings”) comprises two components: an inner wing (dotor dalavch) worn next to the body and an outer wing (gadar dalavch) layered over it. The outer wing is a skirt-like garment: a broad fabric belt encircles the waist, from which hang numerous strap-shaped tassels. The number of tassels is not fixed-common counts include 12, 23, or 27. Interviewing udgan (shamaness) Ru Yi (如意) revealed further detail: “A female shaman’s outer wing carries 21 or 49 tassel-like strips, whereas a male shaman’s outer wing has 72.”

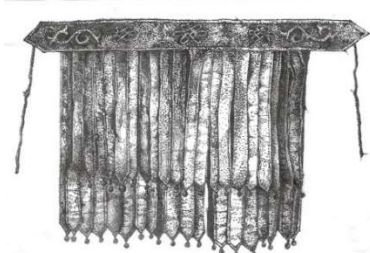


Figure 1. Dadar dalavch



Figure 2. Dotor dalavch

Researcher-teacher Bao Long[6], in his book notes that today most shamans possess only the outer wing (gadar dalavch). The inner wing (dotor dalavch), he writes, consists of four stepped panels of cloth-narrow at the top and slightly wider toward the bottom-joined at the upper edge by a belt. Its colours vary, and the hems are faced with strips of contrasting fabric. Bao Long adds that Khorchin shamanic dress also includes a garment called the “uuj(Figure3.uuj)”. Ways of wearing the uuj differ considerably. For example, a shaman of the Bao clan from Horqin Left Wing North Banner who ran a traditional bonesetting clinic was said to wear white garments. His great-grandmother, the shamaness Lady Naran, reputedly traced her lineage back to the Yuan dynasty and likewise wore a white uuj. [6]



Figure 3. uuj.

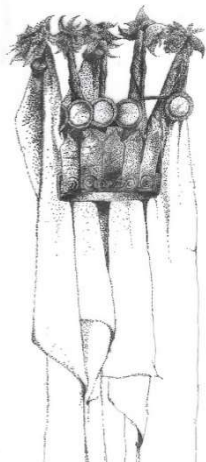


Figure 4. Duulga

During the so-called Manchu (Qing) period it was recorded that shamans conducting ceremonies wore white garments. The Secret History of the Mongols likewise notes that the elder Uusan, referred to as Bekhi (shaman), wore white clothes and rode a white horse.[3] Whether this ancient practice is directly connected to the white attire worn by many modern shamans remains unclear. Another item, the “uoj,” also known as the “commander’s robe,” is one kind of clothing now seen among Mongolian shamans—chiefly those known as laichin. Resembling battlefield armour, it is constructed by linking metal plates, and some versions bear numerous studs above the belt, reminiscent of the crested nails on a helmet. Although some researchers claim that this garment is the traditional shamanic attire of the Khorchin, no conclusive evidence has yet been found to confirm that view. Khorchin shamanic dress also features an important headpiece called the “duulga” (helmet). According to Shaman Erdenebulag, the Eternal Heaven caused the guardian spirits to descend and fashioned the original duulga by arranging white eagle feathers in a ring. Contemporary duulgas are made of iron or brass, and their styles have diversified under the influence of Buddhism.

Moreover, the front surface of the helmet is carved with a lotus motif, flanked by reliefs of a wooden billet and a brass coin. Above these rise three separate finials carved in the forms of a stick, a bell, and three eagles. Each finial carries its own meaning: the stick embodies the blacksmith’s hammer, the bell echoes the songs of birds, and the white eagle stands

for bravery and strength. When a shaman puts on the duulga, he first wears a small toortsog-style cap beneath it. The strip that hangs from the back of this inner cap represents the tail feathers of an eagle. Across the face of the duulga a fringe of black threads is added, symbolising the shaman’s hair. Practitioners explain that, during trance, a shaman’s eyes roll back showing only the whites, and the fringe helps prevent onlookers from being frightened. [7]

Researcher-teacher Bao Long, in his book *Mongolian Shamanism*, writes about shamanic headgear: “The head adornments of Khorchin shamans vary according to their spiritual nature and the circumstances of their calling and service. Nowadays, most shamans follow this pattern: male shamans usually go bare-headed, whereas female shamans arrange their hair in a style suited to their person. A female shaman’s coiffure is relatively simple: she either divides her braids into three strands that hang down, or coils the hair and shapes it into a form resembling an up-turned bowl. The duulga is the headpiece now universally used among contemporary Khorchin shamans.” Studies have confirmed that in Khorchin shamanic dress, items such as the dalavch (“wings”), uuj (“commander’s robe”), and duulga (helmet) constitute the garments and adornments most widely used today.

2. A Stylistic Study of Khorchin Shamanic Implements

Field investigations confirm that the ritual kit currently used by Khorchin shamans comprises a drum and beater, chaan (also called shova), whip, bronze mirror, “heart mirror,” sword or sabre, images of the guardian spirits (ongod), and various standards and banners. Shaman Erdenebulag explains that, in the primordial contest between the Eternal Heaven and the guardian spirits, a vajra-bolt was hurled that split the spirits’ drum, thereby diminishing their power. The holes found in the drums employed by Khorchin shamans today, he says, commemorate that event. Within Khorchin practice the shaman’s drum is regarded as the vessel that carries the shaman up to the heavens. For this reason it is cherished above all other tools and is rarely, if ever, set aside. [1]

-Figure 1 shows a drum used by Khorchin shamans. It is said that by listening to the drum’s volume (loud or soft) and tempo (fast or slow) during a séance, one can gauge the shaman’s trance state. The shamanic drum consists of a metal-and-bamboo hoop covered with hide—traditionally water-buffalo skin. Its diameter ranges from 20 cm to 30 cm, and the Khorchin drum features a handle. Mounted on this handle are three thick rings and nine smaller loops: the three rings symbolize the three realms of the cosmos, while the nine loops stand for the nine continents. The beater (Figure 5.) is generally a forearm-length, slender stick made of elk (or red-deer) bone, wrapped with a strip of cloth or leather.

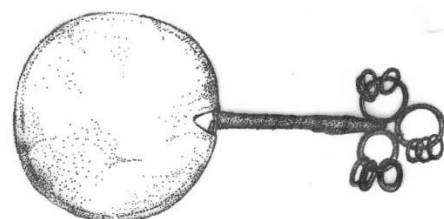


Figure 5. Khorchin shaman’s drum.

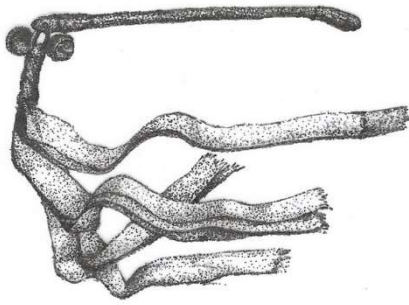


Figure 6. The beater

-Chiian (shova). This is the hand-held rattle now employed by Khorchin shamans. Made of brass, it is a circular implement 10 – 20 cm in diameter whose outline-some say-resembles a small airplane. The handle is wrapped with a five-coloured cord. During a séance, the shaman strikes the shova in a sweeping, half-arc motion while chanting.

-Bronze Mirror and Brass Bells. Bronze mirrors and sets of brass bells are indispensable whenever a Khorchin shaman summons the guardian spirits, each fulfilling several ritual functions. A typical assemblage includes nineteen or twenty small brass bells, while the circular bronze mirror-made in both thick and thin versions-ranges from about 5 cm to 30 cm in diameter. On the inner face of the thicker mirrors one often finds inscriptions in Mongolian, Tibetan, or Manchu script; some mirrors even bear engraved images of the ongod (tutelary spirits). Fieldwork shows that although every mirror is round, individual pieces vary considerably in size. The shaman threads them onto a leather strap and lets them hang down the back. A practitioner normally chooses to work with either the bronze mirror or the bells, and most Khorchin shamans favor the mirror. It is regarded as a symbol of the guardian spirits' power and majesty, making it the preferred implement for warding off disease and calamity and for expelling demons or malevolent spirits that cling to the human body.

-Heart Mirror (Zürkhen Toli). Some Khorchin shamans carry a special "heart mirror." Fashioned from bronze or copper, it is circular (or occasionally polygonal) with a diameter of roughly 5 – 10 cm. The front face is smooth and highly polished, bearing no characters or images, while the reverse has a small central boss. From this boss hang a leather thong, a braided cord, and coloured fabric strands. During healing rites the shaman grips the mirror and rubs its polished side over the afflicted area of the patient's body, using the mirror's surface to draw out and dispel the illness. In addition to wielding other mirrors, Khorchin shamans tie several mirrors to a leather belt fastened around their waist (Figure 6.).

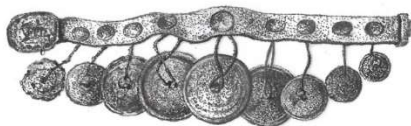


Figure 7. mirrors secured to the belt

-Khorchin shamans today also use a ritual weapon known simply as the sword. Forged of iron and fitted with a hilt, it usually bears a silk ornament tied to the pommel, and its overall length ranges roughly 30–70 cm. The sword is wielded to prod and drive away the demons or malignant spirits believed to cling to the patient.

-Whip. A Khorchin shaman's whip is about 40 – 50 cm long and may have either a wooden or a bone handle. The shaft is traditionally covered with the hide of a rabid dog and then wrapped in coloured silk. Instead of a leather lash, the tip is often fashioned from ribbons in the five sacred colours.

-Tutelar Spirits (Sakhuis / Ongod). Khorchin shamans refer to their guardian spirits as "sakhuis" or "ongod." They may also call an effigy-usually a small human-shaped figure representing the spirit-by the same name. Etymologically, ongod is the plural of ongon, meaning something "primordial" or "untouched by human hands." Early effigies were made of sheep's wool, hemp fibre, or cloth, but with social change they came to be carved from wood or cast in bronze or brass. [2]

3. Typology of Khorchin Shamans and Stylistic Correspondences in Their Attire and Implements

Khorchin shamans may be classified into four categories-khondon, shamans, laichin, and gürdem-and I have made a detailed examination of the attire and ritual implements characteristic of each. This typological analysis forms a key part of my research on Khorchin shamanism. [5]

-Khondon are known among the Khorchin as "grandsons of Heaven" and are regarded as high-level shamans of exceptional power. They are traditional specialists capable of officiating at the most important sacrificial rites, such as the Tenger takikh ("Heaven sacrifice") and Zayaach takikh ("Fate sacrifice"). Historical notes state that the Khondons' forebears were descendants of the Khonkhatans and Zaarins, diviners who carried out augury inside Chinggis Khan's court. The Khondon's ritual attire and equipment include the ethnic (national) costume, the dalavch ("wing" mantle), and the drum with its beater, among other items.

-A Khorchin shamans is a traditional shaman whose practice has absorbed influences from Buddhism and remains widespread across the Khorchin steppe. Core functions include officiating sacrifices, curing illness, expelling evil spirits, and performing divination. Contemporary Khorchin shamans thus combine the classic lineage with what is locally called a "yellow-side" shamanism-that is, a form shaped by the Gelug ("Yellow Hat") Buddhist tradition. When invoking their tutelary spirit, they invite the ongod to enter their own body. Their ritual dress features a duulga (helmet), uuj (commander's robe), and dalavch ("wings"), while their principal implements comprise a drum and beater, bronze mirror, heart mirror, sword, and whip.

-Laichin is a type of shaman that arose after Buddhism had taken root in Mongolia. A laichin generally venerates the Buddhist protector deity Demchig Chojjin (Yamāntaka) as the principal patron and may recite Buddhist scriptures during rituals. Persons become laichin after experiencing the classic "shamanic illness." Their chief duties are healing, exorcising malevolent spirits, and divination. When inviting the tutelary spirit, they are said to draw the ongon into their body through the armpit. The laichin's ritual kit includes a drum and beater, sword, shova rattle, bronze mirror, and heart mirror.

-Gürdem. Like the laichin, the gürdem is a relatively recent form of shaman that emerged at the intersection of Buddhism and traditional Khorchin shamanism. Its defining feature is an ambiguous lineage: although of shamanic descent, the practitioner has at some point become a lama, so the gürdem embodies traits of both shaman and monk.

Primary functions. A gürdem heals illness, expels clinging spirits, performs therapeutic bone-setting and massage (ilj nugalakh), administers acupuncture, and gives moxibustion or cupping treatments[6].

Ritual performance. The practitioner erects a special platform and, while dancing upon it with a sword in hand, drives away calamity and malevolent forces.

Costume. Influenced by Buddhism, a gürdem wears either monastic robes adapted for shamanic use or a distinctive outfit of his own, yet still retains classic items such as the duulga (helmet), uuj (commander's robe), and dalavch ("wings" mantle).

Implements. According to Shaman Erdenebulag, the gürdem employs a drum and beater, a heart mirror, and a sword. This description accords with the findings of researcher Bao Lun in his studies of Mongolian traditions[4].

4. Conclusion

In sum, the Khorchin region of Inner Mongolia is one of the most expansive and continuously preserved bastions of shamanic ritual tradition. The costume and paraphernalia of the Khorchin shaman are far more than ornaments: they carry distinctive symbols and structures that weave together cosmological beliefs and social history. The motions, colours,

and sounds of these garments and implements form a living bridge between the human realm and the world of spirits. In this way, the material culture of Khorchin shamanism-shot through with local Buddhism, nomadic heritage, and lingering memories of the Chinggisid administrative order-continues to present a singular, integrated face of Mongolian shamanism today.

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