

Comparative Study of the Culture, Attire, and Ritual Implements of Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon Religion

Chaobo Yang, M. Molomjamts, D. Ulziibayar

School of Fine Arts and Technology, Mongolian National University of Education, Ulaanbaatar City, Mongolia

Abstract: This study is dedicated to a comparative analysis of the differences between the ritual implements and attire used in Mongolian shamanism and those found in Tibetan Bon religious temples. By conducting an in-depth investigation into the ceremonial tools and clothing of these two cultural traditions, the research aims to uncover the symbolic meanings and cultural values embedded in them. Drawing on multidisciplinary documentary sources, the study seeks to produce comparative results that will enhance our understanding of both the shared and distinct features of these religious cultures. Although these two traditions are rooted in different regions, they share some common elements in their belief systems. Religious practice holds a significant place in Mongolian culture, just as similar religious expressions exist within the Tibetan Bon tradition. While Tibet is widely known for its Buddhist heritage, Mongolian society has also been heavily influenced by Buddhism-especially in the western regions-through sustained cultural exchange. It could be argued that both religious systems have evolved from earlier, more primal forms of belief. The cultures of both peoples are reflected in their daily lives, traditional arts, intangible heritage, oral traditions, and nature-based spirituality. These shared aspects offer insight into the national identity, artistic expression, and spiritual practices of both Mongolian and Tibetan societies. Comparing the ritual garments and tools of Mongolian and Tibetan belief systems holds considerable academic and cultural value. Such analysis contributes to a better understanding of the origins, transformations, and distinctive expressions of nature-based spiritual traditions. Efforts to preserve and revitalize these belief systems-along with studies of the symbolic meanings of ritual items and clothing-can help both Mongolian and Tibetan peoples better understand and appreciate their cultural identities. Comparative research of this kind has the potential to illuminate the spiritual frameworks of shamanic and Buddhist temples, while also highlighting key distinctions. The artistic decoration of ritual implements plays an important role in this evolution, reflecting each culture's aesthetic philosophy and artistic development. The structures and forms of these ritual objects offer essential data for cross-disciplinary studies in fields such as culture, religion, and anthropology. Ultimately, this type of research contributes to intercultural understanding and the preservation of cultural diversity.

Keywords: Mongolian Shamanism, Tibetan Bon, Ritual Attire, Ceremonial Implements, Symbolism, Cultural Comparison.

1. The Origins of Tibetan Bon Religion

The Bon religion is a fundamental component of the Tibetan ethnic cultural tradition. Chronologically, its roots can be traced back to the ancient Zhang Zhung civilization, and geographically, it was once widely practiced across the entire region of the Mount Kailash area. Historically, Bon was the sole and unified religious belief system of the Tibetan people, deeply embedded in their social and spiritual life.[2]

However, beginning in the 11th century, as Buddhism began to establish a dominant presence in the region, the once-prevailing Bon culture experienced a sharp decline. Over the course of more than a thousand years, it was gradually marginalized and transformed into a minority religion existing in more concealed or peripheral cultural spaces. Nevertheless, existing Bon temples, Bon texts, Bon practitioners, and Bon rituals continue to exert influence on Tibetan society even today. [4]

Throughout this millennium-long coexistence and competition, Bon and Tibetan Buddhism have influenced one another. Elements of Bon were absorbed into Buddhist scriptures, rituals, and philosophical discourse, allowing the Bon tradition to persist in a syncretic form within Tibetan religious life. Although Bon may now appear as a relatively weakened tradition within Tibetan territory, its cultural content, worldview, and ritual customs still exert a profound

and lasting influence on Tibetan psychology, cultural consciousness, and behavioral norms-no less than that of Tibetan Buddhism.

Following the loss of its once-central role in society, Bon has largely retreated to rural and remote areas, far from political and cultural centers, where it struggles to survive and evolve. This marginalization has posed significant challenges for the publication and transmission of Bon texts in these high-altitude, environmentally harsh regions. Consequently, Bon scriptural traditions tend to be limited in comparison to the highly institutionalized textual heritage of Tibetan Buddhism. Within the history of Bon literature, two primary textual traditions have been preserved-one represented by realist lineages and another consisting of manuscript-based legal and doctrinal codes-yet overall, the dissemination of Bon texts remains significantly constrained. [9]

2. The Origins of Mongolian Shamanism

Mongolian shamanism has ancient roots and is a traditional religion based on the reverence for nature and the belief in spirits. As one of the earliest forms of religion, it originated from the nomadic people's worship of natural forces. The ancestors of the Mongolian people, throughout centuries of nomadic life, developed a system of spiritual belief that centered on the worship of nature-such as the sun, moon,

mountains, rivers, and animals. [7]

The foundation of this ancient belief system was the veneration of ancestors and spirits, with the belief that the souls of the deceased continued to influence the lives of the living. Shamans, as religious leaders and spiritual intermediaries, serve as the communicators with spirits and ancestral forces. In order to attain supernatural power, shamans enter trance states through dance, music, meditation, and other methods to perform rituals such as offering sacrifices, invoking rain, and healing illnesses. Shamans are considered bridges between humans and nature, and between people and unseen spiritual forces.

The nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols brings shamanism into close contact with nature, emphasizing harmony and symbiosis with the natural environment. This way of life and belief system complement each other, making shamanism highly adaptable to social dynamics and cultural diversity.

Over the course of history, the Mongolian people have come into contact with neighboring ethnic groups and have incorporated elements of other religions, particularly Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. As a result, Mongolian shamanism gradually developed into a unique belief system in certain regions.

At various points in history, Mongolian shamanism has been closely linked with other civilizations of Central and Northeast Asia, promoting the integration and evolution of spiritual traditions. Ancient texts such as *The Secret History of the Yuan Dynasty* and *The Unification of the Ming Dynasty* contain references to the spiritual practices of Mongolian nomadic life, offering valuable historical insight into the origins and evolution of shamanism. These sources provide useful documentation of the socio-cultural context in which Mongolian shamanism emerged and developed.

In the 21st century, Mongolian shamanism is experiencing a revival, combining traditional beliefs with modern concerns such as ecological protection. In some Mongolian communities, shamanism continues to play a significant role in both cultural and religious life. Today's shamans not only inherit and preserve traditional rituals but also participate in social movements related to environmental conservation and ecological restoration. [1]

Both Mongolian shamanism and Tibetan Bon religion (the traditional belief system of the Tibetan people) were historically influenced by Buddhism, and at certain points in time, even suppressed by it. Since the spread of Buddhism into both Tibet and Mongolia, it has become a dominant religious force, competing with earlier indigenous traditions in terms of belief systems, rituals, and spiritual authority.

The expansion of Buddhism introduced a new worldview and doctrinal system that, in many cases, opposed traditional animistic and ancestral beliefs. Fundamental differences emerged between Buddhism, Bon, and Shamanism—particularly in their cosmologies, views on spirits, and ritual practices. For example, Buddhist teachings on reincarnation, karma, and the pursuit of liberation from the cycle of rebirth often conflicted with indigenous perspectives on the afterlife and nature-based spirituality.

Throughout Tibetan and Mongolian history, the relationship between Buddhism and state authorities was typically close. In various periods, ruling powers actively supported the spread of Buddhism as a means of consolidating political control. This often involved the marginalization or suppression of other traditions such as Bon and Shamanism. The alliance between Buddhist institutions

and local elites—especially during times of social upheaval—allowed Buddhism to be used as a political tool to dominate alternative belief systems.

Buddhism also had a profound cultural influence by promoting education and reshaping local spiritual life. Monasteries gradually replaced traditional religious spaces, becoming not only centers of worship but also centers of learning. As Buddhism spread, it often absorbed, transformed, or displaced local beliefs, sometimes leading to the devaluation of older traditions.

As societies evolved, older belief systems and rituals became less compatible with new historical and cultural contexts, which enabled Buddhism to meet emerging social and ideological needs. For instance, during the Mongol Empire, certain Buddhist currents developed complex relationships with other religions, such as Islam, potentially contributing to the decline of some traditional practices.

Despite periods of persecution and marginalization, both Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon have demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. In modern times, they continue to preserve their distinctiveness and traditional values while engaging in processes of cultural revitalization and social relevance. The historical subordination of these traditions to Buddhism is largely the result of religious competition, political dynamics, cultural assimilation, and historical conditions. This process reflects the broader patterns of religious conflict, transformation, and syncretism throughout Central and Inner Asian history.

3. Material Differences Between Mongolian Shamanic and Tibetan Bon Ritual Implement

3.1. Ritual Implements of Mongolian Shamanism

Drum: Usually made from animal hide, the drum is used during rituals to induce trance states, allowing the shaman to communicate with spirits and connect the human world with the spiritual realm.

Staff or Ritual Scepter: Often adorned with animal fur, the staff symbolizes the shaman's authority. It may serve as a conduit between the shaman and the spirit world.

Mallet: Used to beat the drum or symbolize the summoning of spirits; serves as a key ritual implement.

Offering Vessels: Utilized in sacrificial rites, especially those intended to communicate with natural spirits.

3.2. Ritual Implements of Tibetan Buddhism (Bon Religion in Tibetan Context)

Vajra: A common ritual object symbolizing wisdom and indestructible power. It is believed to dispel ignorance and obstacles, often associated with guardian deities.

Bell: Often paired with the vajra, symbolizing wisdom and spiritual awakening. The sound of the bell is believed to purify negative energies.

Scripture Holders and Offering Implements: Used in religious ceremonies to protect sacred texts and make ritual offerings, reflecting deep religious significance.

Incense Burner: Employed to purify ritual space and attract the attention of deities.

Material Distinctions

Mongolian shamanic implements are typically made of natural materials such as wood, leather, and bone, reflecting a

direct relationship with nature and ancestral cosmology. Decorations tend to be simple and rustic, evoking indigenous aesthetic traditions.

In contrast, Tibetan Buddhist and Bon implements are often crafted from metal (e.g., bronze or silver) and feature intricate ornamentation, demonstrating advanced craftsmanship and elaborate symbolic design. Many items incorporate deep Buddhist iconography and cosmological motifs. [10].

3.3. Ritual Application and Function

Mongolian Shamanism emphasizes individual, direct interaction with nature and the spirit world. Ritual implements are used in personal ceremonies such as healing, invocation of spirits, and offerings. The use of these items is often intimate and closely tied to clan-based traditions.

Tibetan Bon and Buddhist Traditions, by contrast, employ ritual objects primarily in collective religious contexts, such as large public ceremonies and scripture recitations. The use of sacred implements adheres to codified ritual frameworks and emphasizes communal experience and spiritual discipline.

4. Symbolic Differences between Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon Religion

4.1. Relationship between Humans and Nature

Mongolian Implements: Drums and mallets symbolize direct interaction with the natural world. Shamans use these tools to communicate with nature spirits and ancestral beings, emphasizing reverence for natural cycles and harmony.

Tibetan Implements: Objects like the vajra and bell reflect not only human-nature relationships but also deeper metaphysical principles such as causality, cosmic order, and spiritual insight. They are used to facilitate inner awakening and convey a more philosophical cosmology.[3]

4.2. Spiritual Power and Authority

Mongolian Implements: Staffs and offering vessels embody personal spiritual power and the shaman's mediating role within the tribe. They reflect a direct and individualized connection with the spirit world.

Tibetan Implements: Ritual objects such as the vajra and bell symbolize institutional religious authority and collective faith. The unbreakable form of the vajra signifies eternal truth and spiritual strength.

4.3. Sacrifice and Expressions of Faith

Mongolian Shamanism: Implements are used in intimate, personalized rituals for healing, protection, and guidance, emphasizing individual relationships with ancestral and nature spirits.

Tibetan Bon Tradition: Implements are integral to complex ritual structures aimed at maintaining cosmic order and offering devotion to deities. They express deep communal devotion and shared pursuit of spiritual truth.[6]

4.4. Cultural and Cosmological Symbolism

Mongolian Implements: Reflect the cosmology of harmony and balance between humans and nature. The tools often express nomadic worldview, ecological adaptation, and respect for natural cycles.

Tibetan Implements: Embody metaphysical and symbolic meanings tied to Buddhist philosophy and Bon cosmology, including doctrines of impermanence, enlightenment, and

transcendence.[8]

5. Comparative Symbolism and Cultural Functions of Ritual Implements in Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon Religion

Tibetan Bon ritual implements symbolize a complex philosophical worldview, including concepts such as reincarnation, karma, and liberation. This reveals the deep cosmological understanding embedded in Tibetan culture, emphasizing a balance between inner spiritual practice and external ritual action. [5]

Despite differences in doctrinal systems, ritual tools in both Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon share notable commonalities. These parallels reflect similar spiritual functions and cultural values. The following comparative dimensions help elucidate these shared and divergent features:

5.1. Spiritual and Religious Function

Mediation with the Spirit World: In both traditions, ritual implements serve as instruments of communication between believers and spiritual entities, whether ancestral spirits in Mongolian practice or deities in Bon. Shamans or priests use these tools to invoke or connect with the spiritual realm.

Ceremonial Significance: Ritual objects hold central roles in religious ceremonies, symbolizing devotion, divine inheritance, and the enactment of spiritual beliefs.

5.2. Use of Natural Elements

Natural Materials: Ritual tools in both cultures are commonly made from materials such as wood, metal, bone, and animal hide. This reflects a deep respect for and dependence on the natural world.

Nature Worship: The design and function of magical implements often align with natural symbolism, emphasizing harmony with the environment and spiritual reverence for nature.

5.3. Symbolic Meaning

Sacredness: Ritual objects are seen as sacred representations of divine presence and cultural identity, used to express reverence and prayers to higher powers.

Transmissive Power: Through ritual use, these objects are believed to transmit protection, blessings, or enlightenment to practitioners.

5.4. Folk Art and Aesthetics

Craftsmanship and Decoration: The implements often feature intricate craftsmanship and symbolic decoration, reflecting each culture's artistic heritage. These may include motifs derived from religious doctrines, historical narratives, or natural elements.

Artistic Parallels: The visual design, patterns, and colors used in both traditions express strong cultural identities and showcase their respective aesthetic lineages.

5.5. Communal Ritual Practice

Collective Usage: Though applied in different forms, both traditions employ ritual implements in collective ceremonies that reinforce communal beliefs and cultural cohesion.

Ethical and Festive Contexts: Magical tools are used during seasonal rituals, healing rites, prayers for rain, and communal

festivals, representing a wide range of cultural functions.

5.6. Heritage Transmission and Education

Cultural Transmission: Ritual implements are not only tools for performance but also vehicles of knowledge. Novice shamans or priests often learn their religious functions through direct participation.

Educational Role: The symbolic meanings and ritual uses of these tools help practitioners internalize cultural identity and spiritual values, thereby preserving tradition.

In both Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon religion, ritual objects play essential roles in bridging the human and spiritual realms. In Mongolian practice, these tools support intimate, personal engagements with nature spirits, while in Bon they are embedded within structured, institutional rituals that convey shared religious truths. Both traditions utilize natural materials, symbolizing a common reverence for nature.

6. Conclusion

Mongolian ritual implements emphasize raw materials and elemental aesthetics, while Tibetan Bon tools often display refined metalwork and elaborate symbolism. Historical influences—such as the Manchu Qing conquest and Buddhist expansion—particularly affected the development of Khorchin Mongolian shamanism. Like in Tibet, metal implements became more prominent in Mongolian rituals, and Qing imperial pressure led to a decline of shamanic practices in regions like Chahar, while Khorchin retained more ritual heritage.

Both cultures share a deep-rooted cosmology that values balance between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. Mongolian Shamanism is closely tied to nomadic ecological wisdom and emphasizes natural cycles, whereas Tibetan Bon—under strong Buddhist influence—focuses on cause and effect, karmic law, and spiritual liberation.

Over time, both traditions have evolved and adapted to changing social contexts. Mongolian shamanism incorporated diverse elements through interaction with neighboring peoples, while Bon developed into a more formalized system under Buddhist influence. In sum, ritual implements in both Mongolian Shamanism and Tibetan Bon are not only essential religious tools but also cultural symbols.

Preserving these traditions in an era of globalization is crucial.

Such comparative studies help foster appreciation and understanding of cultural diversity. Looking forward, they offer pathways to intercultural dialogue, mutual learning, and shared development across ethnic boundaries.

References

- [1] BaoSiqin, & JinHai. (2007). *A Study of the Spiritual Culture of the Grasslands*. Hohhot, China: Inner Mongolia Education Press.
- [2] Bjerken, Z. (2004, 10). Exorcising the Illusion of Bon “Shamans”: A Critical Genealogy of Shamanism in Tibetan Religions. *Revue d'etudes Tibetaines* (Issue 6), pp. 4-59.
- [3] Ermakov, D. (2008). *Be and Bön: Ancient Shamanic Traditions of Siberia and Tibet in their Relation to the Teachings of a Central Asian Buddha*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Vajra Publications.
- [4] Ermakov, D. (2011). Bon as a multifaceted phenomenon: looking beyond Tibet to the cultural and religious traditions of Eurasia. *Bon, Zhang Zhung and Early Tibet*. Foundation for the Preservation of Yungdrung Bön.
- [5] ErmakovDmitry. (2011). Bon as a multifaceted phenomenon: looking beyond Tibet to the cultural and religious traditions of Eurasia. *Bon, Zhang Zhung and Early Tibet*.
- [6] ErmakovDmitry. (2011). Bon as a multifaceted phenomenon: looking beyond Tibet to the cultural and religious traditions of Eurasia. U.K.: Foundation for the Preservation of Yungdrung Bön.
- [7] HeissigWalther. (2016). *The Religions of Mongolia*. (GengSheng, translation) Beijing, China: China Tibetology Publishing House.
- [8] Ramble, C. (2023). *Bon Deity Trowo Tsochok Khagying: A Microcosm of the Bon Religion*. New York City, USA: Rubin Museum of Art.
- [9] Yan, C., & Zhao, Y. (2025). The functions and symbolic meanings of Bonpo apparel and accessories in ceremonial rituals. *Arts & Communication*.
- [10] ZhangMu. (1991). *Notes on Mongolian Nomadism*. (Edited by ZhangZheng Ming, & SongJu Cheng) Shanxi Province, China: Shanxi People's Publishing House.