



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Theoretical and Typological Landscape of Khorchin Shamanism: Regional Variations and Shamanic Classifications

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 11, 2025 Accepted: June 27, 2025	Khorchin shamanism, a traditional worship system with a rich heritage, is characterized by its multifaceted spiritual beliefs and practices. This study systematically analyzes the theoretical underpinnings, regional variations, and typological classifications within Khorchin shamanism, drawing insights from ethnography and historical studies. It explores the foundational concepts of shamanism, examines how local environmental, cultural, and religious influences have shaped distinct practices in Western and Eastern Khorchin, and categorizes the primary shamanic types, including Hondon, Khorchin shaman, Laichin, and Gurdem. The findings highlight the complex internal diversification of Khorchin shamanism and its historical evolution, contributing to a deeper understanding of this unique spiritual and cultural phenomenon
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INTRODUCTION

Shamanism, an ancient religious and cultural heritage, is a global phenomenon believed to have originated during the early stages of human social development, particularly within matriarchal tribal systems (Eliade, 1964, pp. 3–10). As a result of humanity's initial cognitive processes, shamanic culture holds a significant place in the world's cultural heritage (Diószegi, 1963, p. 15).

Contemporary researchers worldwide continue to explore the rich cultural and artistic heritage of shamanism, particularly its manifestations in China (Johnson, 1964, p. 22). The traditions of North and Northeast Asia, in particular, reveal their ideas and material forms through the distinctive style of shamanic objects (Diószegi, 1963, pp. 76–84).

Mongolian shamanism, an integral part of this global system, has been predominantly preserved in the Khulunbuir and Khorchin regions (Tserendorj, 1959, pp. 4–6). Despite its historical significance, there is a notable scarcity of comprehensive works focusing on the artistic heritage of Khorchin shamanism, highlighting a critical area requiring dedicated academic attention. Previous research on Khorchin shamanism has largely concentrated on ethnographic, linguistic, psychological, and pathological aspects, with limited in-depth studies on its visual arts (Ulaantsav & Suldug, 1988, pp. 79–80).

Western scholars have developed methodologies for interpreting religious concepts through the form, design, and figurative elements of shamanic objects (Eliade, 1964, pp. 90–92), suggesting that these research outcomes can inform modern design and the utilization of cultural heritage (Johnson, 1964, pp. 115–116). The distinctive style of Khorchin region's tools possesses a unique content that reflects the interplay of geography, mountainous terrain, hunting practices, nomadic lifestyles, and agricultural cultures. This is further influenced by traditional Chinese religions alongside indigenous shamanism (Tsai Jiachu, 1990, p. 45; Fu Yuguang, 1985, p. 23), necessitating an investigation into its multiple cultural layers.

This study aims to analyze the meaning, symbolism, and design of the ritual clothing and tools of Khorchin shamanism from the perspectives of ethnography and art studies. By systematically examining these artifacts, this research seeks to uncover their multifaceted roles as expressions of spiritual power, cultural identity, and aesthetic values, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of this rich material and intellectual heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly examination of shamanism as a profound cult system gained scientific interest globally from the latter half of the 17th century, particularly in Russia and subsequently in China. This section reviews the historical trajectory of shamanic studies, highlighting key academic contributions.

Historical Overview of Foreign Studies of Shamanism

Shamanism is understood not merely as an individual spiritual acceptance but as an ancient historical form of human cognition and a foundational intellectual culture. Early scientific documentation of shamanism began with Russian travelers in the second half of the 17th century. These explorers, journeying among the Tungus peoples of the Baikal and Yenisei River basins, meticulously recorded and documented their rituals, introducing the concept of shamanism to European academic circles and laying its foundational study (Diószegi, 1963, p. 15; Johnson, 1964, p. 22).

Initially, research was confined to Altaic ethnic groups predominantly in Siberia. Researchers, leveraging Russia's geographical proximity and local expertise, initiated organized studies of Siberian shamanism (Anisimov, 1963, p. 9). Pioneers in this field included prominent Russian scholars such as A. Yadrintsev, Klementz, N. Mikhailovsky, and Shtenbok (Kuzentsov, 1955, p. 18). This initial wave of research also saw non-Russian scholars like Polish Shapochka and Americans Shertsen and Bogoras travel to Siberia, collecting and publishing evidence of intricate shamanic rituals and tools (Bogoras, 1904, p. 44).

By the mid-20th century, a theoretical shift occurred, moving beyond external forms and ritualistic images to explore shamanism as a philosophical, psychological, and cultural construct. This era saw the emergence of works by N. Nikolay, U. Harujva, A. Ormakus, V. Schmidt, and notably, M. Eliade, whose contributions elevated the philosophy of shamanism to a distinctive academic level (Eliade, 1964, pp. 3–10). Among this period's researchers, the Hungarian scholar Diószegi extensively documented the oral traditions, rituals, and mythological structures of shamanism. Concurrently, Johnson, from an art studies perspective, focused on the design and depiction of shamanic clothing and tools, offering cultural interpretations (Diószegi, 1963, pp. 78–82; Johnson, 1964, pp. 115–118).

Japanese researchers played a crucial role in studying East Asian shamanism, particularly among the Mongols and Manchus. Shiratori Kurakichi, Torii Ryuzou, and Murayama Tomoyuki conducted individual research and compiled detailed ethnographic historical documents. For example, Torii Ryuzou's "Research on the Traces of Manchu Mongols" included illustrations of copper mirrors and tools used by shamans, serving as valuable research material (Torii, 1911, pp. 55–59). The first Mongolian scholar to systematically study Mongolian shamanism was Ts. Tserendorj, whose 1959 work, "A Brief History of Mongolian Shamanism," provided a historical timeline and categorized its origin, development, decline, and revival, establishing a precedent in the field (Tserendorj, 1959, pp. 4–15).

Research on Shamanism in China

The scholarly pursuit of shamanism in China as an independent field of scientific inquiry commenced in the 1970s. While earlier, in 1934, Lin Chunsheng's "The Hezhe Nation in the Lower Reaches of the Sungari River" made pioneering observations, the contemporary intellectual climate and theoretical limitations restricted its scope to a partial and unifying approach (Lin Chunsheng, 1934, pp. 27–34).

The 1970s marked a resurgence, fueled by the translation of foreign classics by Eliade, Diószegi, and Johnson into Chinese. This revival gained momentum with the engagement of institutions such as the National Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Center for Mongolian History of Inner Mongolia University (Ulaantsav & Suldig, 1988, pp. 78–79). The 1980s witnessed a proliferation of scholarly articles on shamanism in Chinese journals, with previously

"unseen" and "unmentioned" topics becoming subjects of vigorous academic discourse, and the term "shamanism" entering scientific vocabulary (Tsai Jiaqi, 1990, p. 45; Fu Yuguang, 1985, p. 23).

This intellectual movement produced significant works. Ulaancav's "First Study of the Mongolian Root Religious Ideas" (1984), Fu Yuguang's "The Concept of Heavenly Space" (1985), and "The First Explanation of the Concept of Heavenly Space" (1986) were among the first to explore the inner philosophy of shamanism. Historical perspectives were also explored, with Liu Guangtian's "The Historical Conditions of the Extinction of Shamanism in the Mongols and Manchus" (1986), Huiying's "The Historical Characteristics of Nishan Shamanism" (1987), and Cheng Xiong's "Mongolian Shamanism and the Tang Dynasty's Campaign" (1992).

Studies examining the continuity of shamanism in folk traditions and legends also emerged. Lan Ying's "Manas Epic and Shamanic Culture" (1990) and "The Legend of the Eagle of the North" (1993), along with Se Ying's "The Evolution of the Myths of Mongolian Shamans" (1991), provided deeper insights into shamanism's living language and folk manifestations. In religious studies, Cai Jiaqi investigated "Evenki Root Beliefs and Forms of Sacrifice" (1990), and Ulan Tsav and Suldug's seminal study of Khorchin shamanism (1988) remains a valuable resource. Linguistic analyses included Ulashikhun's examination of the grammatical roots of "shaman" (1990), Fang Zhenning's study of "Evenki Shamanism" (1989), and Huiying's work on "Manchu Shamanism" (1989). Comparative scientific methodologies were applied by Zhang Yun in "A Comparative Study of Tibetan Buddhism and North Asian Shamanism" (1992) and Lan Ying in "Shamanistic Traditions of the Turkic Peoples of the Northwest" (1993).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that within the Chinese research context, shamanism is not merely a subject of religion and ritual but a multifaceted intersection of culture, imagination, philosophy, linguistics, ethnography, and history, with its scientific study evolving through distinct stages.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an ethnographic and art-historical approach to analyze the theoretical and typological aspects of Khorchin shamanism. The primary data collection involved a qualitative field study conducted between 2022 and 2025. This fieldwork focused on shamanic rituals and tools found in the Khorchin right-hand middle district of Tongliao city, Inner Mongolia, and other surrounding districts, specifically to gather insights into shamanic classifications and regional differences.

The research methods utilized include

Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with experienced shamans, such as the Zairan Erdenebulag and the Udgan Ru Yi of the Shavart ruins in the East Garin Dund district. These interviews aimed to gather first-hand accounts of the symbolism, usage, and spiritual significance of the ritual objects, as well as the distinctions in their practices and classifications.

Observations

Direct observation of shamanic rituals provided contextual understanding of their function and aesthetic presentation, contributing to the understanding of different shamanic types and regional variations.

Photo Documentation

Extensive photographic documentation was carried out to capture the visual details, design elements, and overall appearance of the ritual clothing and tools, supporting the identification of distinct practices and characteristics.

The collected materials provided a comprehensive understanding of the styles, images, and symbols embedded within the shamanic artifacts, allowing for a detailed analysis of their cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions, particularly concerning the typologies and regional specificities of Khorchin shamanism.

Findings

The ritual clothing and tools of Khorchin shamans are far more than utilitarian items; they are intricate cultural complexes embodying profound spiritual meaning, philosophical ideas, and ethnic consciousness. This section details the theoretical underpinnings of shamanism, the distinct regional variations within Khorchin shamanism, and the classification of shaman types.

Theoretical Basis for the Origin, Spread, and Characteristics of Shamanism

Shamanism, as the initial stream of human thought and spiritual consciousness, emerged from early human interactions with nature, fostering ideas about spirits and the spiritual realm. This primitive belief system evolved into a philosophical framework for existence. Globally, researchers concur that shamanism is a polytheistic religion rooted in the matriarchal tribal system and based on nature worship. Its foundation lies in animism—the belief that everything possesses an indestructible, eternal spirit, reflecting a profound understanding of the universe's soul (Eliade, 1964, p. 5).

The definition of shamanism is often categorized into three levels

Narrow Definition

Emphasizes rituals inherited among the Tungusic peoples of Siberia and Northeast Asia, limiting its reference to their specific practices (Eliade, 1964, pp. 4–6).

Broad Definition

A comprehensive concept encompassing the spirit worship and magical rituals of diverse peoples, including Arctic Eskimos, Scandinavians, Beringians, Australian Aborigines, and North American Indians (Hoppál, 2007, p. 12).

Intermediate Definition

Covers the worship of neighboring peoples influenced by and based on the Tungusic model (Eliade, 1964, p. 7).

M. Eliade, a renowned French researcher, stressed that "shamanism manifests itself in its most perfect form in the regions of Siberia and Central Asia," yet cautioned against geographically limiting its scope (Eliade, 1964, p. 10), given similar forms of worship found from African tribes to Native American Indians (Vitebsky, 2001, pp. 22–25). The debate over a single origin for this widespread cult is ongoing. The prevailing migration theory, which posits "humans of African origin spread throughout the world," has led Chinese scholars to suggest that "shamanism may be a tradition of Mongolian nomads" (Wang, 2004, pp. 34–36).

The historical roots of shamanism are deeply intertwined with the role of women. Studies indicate that women were primary practitioners of divination, sky communication, and sacrificial rituals in matriarchal clans (Eliade, 1964, p. 21). For instance, in traditional Japanese Shinto, female shamans (Onna-Kami and Miko) lead ceremonies, embodying nature worship, ancestor reverence, and human existence order (Teeuwen & Rambelli, 2003, p. 68).

Khorchin shamanism today represents a complex system that unifies nature, spirits, ancestors, and divine entities. This tradition is not merely a collection of ritual objects but a living heritage encompassing social consciousness, psychological values, and cultural legacy (Tserendorj, 2023, pp. 89–90). The Khorchin shaman is a religious figure, an intellectual inheritor, a conduit between the heavenly and human realms, an interpreter of souls, and a cultural transmitter. Each piece of their clothing, every belt, and amulet is a focal point of meaning, symbolism, and worship, conveying dual meanings across aesthetic, ceremonial, and cognitive dimensions. Therefore, studying Khorchin shamanic clothing and objects is not only an analysis of fine art but also a profound cognitive process of deciphering the underlying beliefs, philosophy, thought patterns, cultural networks, and traditional intellectual heritage.

Features and Differences in the Use of Shamanism in Western and Eastern Khorchin

Shamanic traditions within the Khorchin ethnic group exhibit regional variations shaped by local environment, culture, religious influences, and tribal structures. These differences are evident in tools, rituals, amulet names, and even "spirit invocation" methods, including the design and purpose of shamanic clothing and tools in Western and Eastern Khorchin.

Use of "Wings":

Western Khorchin

Wings are categorized into external and internal, with fixed numbers of pendants (e.g., 12, 23, 27) and a highly organized structure. Pendants are typically made of red and black cloth.

Eastern Khorchin

Wing shapes and colors are more fluid, adapting to the type of amulets and lineage spirits. Elaborate wings with 49 or 72 pendants are sometimes used (Ru Yi, 2023).

The Handle and Sound Structure of the "Hengereg" (Tambourine)

Baruun Khorchin (Western Khorchin):

The Hengereg handle features three thick rings and nine carved rings, symbolizing the three worlds and nine continents.

Zuun Khorchin (Eastern Khorchin)

Some tambourines have a single central ring, believed to concentrate body energy during rituals. The Hengereg typically has a diameter of 20–25 cm and is lightweight.

Differences in the Shape and Material of the "Shoes"

Western Khorchin

Shoes are crafted from rabid dog skin and felt, commonly featuring 3 manjigs, 2 hongginuur, and 1 zev nailed to the front.

Eastern Khorchin

Shoes are adorned with silk embroidery and colored silk. Rust on the toes is occasionally decorated with sheep and eagle images.

"Head Decoration" or Use of Helmets

Western Khorchin

Female shamans wear an inverted-bowl-shaped helmet with three hanging tails. Male shamans are usually bare-headed (Bao Lun, 2012).

Eastern Khorchin: Helmets feature three pillars, with carvings of trees, bells, and elee birds, each element explained by its respective cult and function (Shaman, Erdenebulagiin kharya, 2024).

Representation of Amulets and Spirits

Western Khorchin

Spirit depictions are traditionally made using raw wood, wool, and cloth.

Eastern Khorchin

Amulets made of bronze and brass, often depicting humanoid figures with prominent faces, are common, mostly linked to beliefs originating from virgin mountains.

These regional variations highlight the complex internal diversification of Khorchin shamanism, shaped by local natural conditions, tribal origins, religious syncretism, and historical heritage.

Four Types of Khorchin Shaman, Their Ritual Tools, and Differences

Khorchin shamanic traditions are categorized into four main types—hondon, shaman, laichin, and gurdem—based on their origin, worship practices, and material differences (Bo Lun, 2011).

Each type possesses distinct ritual tools, clothing, and amulet interpretations, forming the complex ethnographic tapestry of Khorchin shamanism.

Hondon

Traditional Heavenly Clan Shaman

Represents the oldest and most powerful stratum of Khorchin shamanism, often referred to as "heavenly nephews."

Believed to be descendants of the Honkhata and Zaarin clans, who served in Genghis Khan's court (Bo Lun, 2011).

Perform major rituals and pilgrimages, such as "worshiping the heavens" and "worshiping the traveler."

Clothing includes nationally patterned robes, wings, special tambourines, and clubs, emphasizing ritual symbolism.

Khorchin Shaman

Central Traditional Shaman

The most widespread type in the contemporary Khorchin region.

Adhere to national shamanic traditions while incorporating Buddhist influences.

Main rituals involve spirit calling, ceremonies, healing, and dispelling evil spirits, believed to absorb amulets into their bodies.

Utilize helmets, robes, wings, bronze mirrors, heart mirrors, swords, whips, tambourines, and clubs.

Laichin

Shaman with Buddhist Influence

Shamans who have embraced shamanism due to "shamanic illness" and integrated Buddhist teachings.

Primarily worship the "Demchig Choijin" god amulet and practice scripture reading.

Described as those who absorb virgin idols through their veins and cast amulets.

Tools include tambourines, showa, bronze mirrors, heart mirrors, and swords.

Gurdem

A Combination of Lama and Shamanism

A unique figure emerging from the synthesis of shaman and lama worship.

Not hereditary shamans; became shamanists due to illness and received lama education.

Perform rituals on special stages, using swords to expel negative energy through dance, and employing traditional massage, acupuncture, and acupressure.

Costumes include helmets, robes, wings, tambourines, heart mirrors, and swords (Bo Lu, 2011).

These four types of Khorchin shamanism are distinguished by their cultural layers, religious influences, and ritual forms. Hondon represents an ancient, ancestral courtly cult remnant; Khorchin shamanism is a widely practiced traditional form; Laichin combines Buddhist temple traditions; and Gurdem is a newer phenomenon uniting shamanic and lamaistic practices. This classification, confirmed by field research, historical records, and contemporary shaman interviews, reveals a deep stratum of worship, culture, traditional medicine, and symbolism in the Khorchin region.

The history, culture, and shamanic traditions of the Khorchin Mongols are a unique phenomenon, richly developed through layers of historical influences and cross-cultural interactions. Since the 15th century, cultural, worship, and clothing styles in western and eastern Mongolia began to diverge, which was directly reflected in the rituals and customs of shamanism. For example, stylistic differences in the *utleng* of Oirat and Khalkh Mongols are evident in shamanic clothing and ritual symbols, reflecting distinct social, religious, and cultural structures and developments of the time.

Khorchin shamanic clothing and ritual objects form a complex structure influenced by Mongolian nomadic culture and lifestyle, as well as cultural interactions between the Khalkh and Oirat. The Khorchin people included bilingual and multi-ethnic groups (Dagur, Shiwei, Solon, Guarcha), fostering unique ethnic culture and language characteristics. Shamanic ritual objects absorbed features combining these diverse cultural influences. Furthermore, Khorchin shamanic objects were shaped not only by natural and social conditions but also by factors of artistic, aesthetic, and historical development. The administrative structure of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, the rules of the provinces, and the "kinship" policy regulations affected the mutual influence of Mongolian and Chinese cultures, and brought about a certain evolution in the patterns, decorations, and ritual forms of shamanic clothing. Consequently, Khorchin shamanic clothing is not merely a means of worship but also an expression of cultural unity. This necessitates studying Khorchin shamanic clothing and utensils within the context of historical-cultural connections, cultural assimilation, and inter-ethnic influence. This connection extends beyond clothing to ritual forms, moral structures, and the essence of worship philosophy, serving as a distinct example of cultural integration research.

Khorchin shamanic clothing is a specialized item imbued with spiritual meaning, fundamentally different from ordinary attire. These garments are not only a conduit for the shaman's divine inspiration but also a physical manifestation of ancient Mongolian sky worship, religious ideology, and traditional knowledge (Bao Lun, 2011; Zhang Xin, 2007). The structure, shape, color, and choice of decoration are not merely ornamental but intricately linked to factors such as shamanic amulet type, cult, lineage, gender, ritual direction, and historical tradition. Researcher Bao Lun (2011) describes Khorchin shamanic clothing as "a spiritual burden, a permanent keeper of rituals, and an expression of the amulet," while Zhang Xin (2007) evaluates its structure, design, and use as "a cultural heritage of generations with a combination of state, religion, and ethnic culture."

CONCLUSION

This research has provided a foundational understanding of Khorchin shamanism by elucidating its theoretical underpinnings, identifying distinct regional variations, and classifying its diverse shamanic types. It confirms that Khorchin shamanism is a multifaceted spiritual system rooted in animism, with regional adaptations influenced by local conditions, cultural interactions, and tribal origins. The identification of Hondon, Khorchin shaman, Laichin, and Gurdem types reveals a complex ethnographic landscape, each characterized by unique origins, worship practices, and ritual functions. This systematic categorization contributes to a clearer appreciation of the internal diversification and historical evolution within Khorchin shamanic traditions.

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