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Mongolian Buddhism, science and healing: a modernist legacy

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at how the changing relationship between science and religion from the *fin de siècle* to the present period continues to influence healing practices in Mongolia. It explores how science and religion, rather than being congenitally antithetical to one another, are frequently co-constitutive. By following a few key historical lineages of spiritualism in their dialogue with the Mongolian cultural region, the article illustrates how ongoing exchanges between science and religion have contributed to changes in contemporary Mongolian urban religious practices. As the article illustrates, science, and/or the idea of science, has resulted in changes to lay religious epistemologies and methodologies. At the same time the prestige of science can be used as a means of underlining the strength of ritual efficacy, particularly within Buddhism. Yet when science or allopathic medicine fails to explain or to heal, science is used as a yardstick against which the transcendent power of ritual becomes evident.

KEYWORDS

Mongolian Buddhism;
spiritualism; aura; science;
religion; socialism

In 2015 I caught up with an old friend in one of Ulaanbaatar's new inner-city cafes. We had first met in 2009 at a time when she had just returned from living in London and I was beginning my research with Buddhist centres and temples in the capital. Although she was not a Buddhist herself, Enkhjargal was interested in my research and accompanied me on some of my preliminary visits to Buddhist temples and museums. As we made our way around the Choijin Lama Temple Museum she told me that she felt ambivalent towards religious specialists. Whilst some were good, many, she said, were motivated primarily by self-interest, carrying out rituals for their own financial benefit instead of to assist others (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019, 2020; Buyandelger 2013). In 2013, when I returned to Mongolia for a shorter trip, Enkhjargal explained the new relationship that she had developed with her maternal family's shaman. Many people were now regularly visiting shamans, she told me, and some were becoming shamans themselves. Her sister's husband had recently become a shaman, but as he channelled his own family's ancestors, rather than hers, she visited her maternal second cousin (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2016). In 2015, when I returned to Ulaanbaatar to carry out further fieldwork, Enkhjargal was

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excited to tell me about the latest religious changes in the capital. Aura reading, she explained, had become very popular amongst her middle-class friends. Responding to a friend's recommendation, she had visited an aura reader situated next to Gandanteg-chenliin Hiid (Gandan) – Ulaanbaatar's largest Buddhist temple complex.

Auras are colourful energy fields thought to emanate from a person's body that can be seen by special people or equipment. It is believed that by reading a person's aura one can see if there are any deficiencies in a person's energetic systems, and if so, prescribe a course of action for healing. The idea that a person has an aura, an emanation of light which can be seen in certain circumstances, was popularized by Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934) who was a member of the Theosophical Society at the turn of the twentieth century (Hanegraaff et al. 2005, 686).¹ Due in part to the Theosophical Society's influence, aura readings are often connected to the idea that there are subtle energetic forces underpinning all matter in the universe. At the *fin de siècle* new technologies and scientific endeavours were frequently mixed with spiritualism and explorations into the paranormal. Early aura readings were often conducted through, and inspired by, newly developed technologies, specifically photography. In some early photographs unexplained lights were seen floating around the bodies of the subjects in the frame, inspiring the later development of kirlian photography which uses high voltages to focus on the lights (or auras) that appear to surround the subject under certain conditions.

Connected to this lineage of early twentieth-century blendings of science, technology and spiritualism, the aura reader that Enkhjargal visited incorporated a computer into her diagnosis. As Enkhjargal explained, for the price of 25,000 *tögrögs* (about US\$12.50 at that time) the aura reader used a computer to calibrate her reading. Based on her aura, he analysed her supranormal status and predicted events that would likely occur in her future. He told her that on her mother's side she had a spirit who was looking out for her, but no one helping from her father's side – an evaluation which was corroborated by her regular visits to her maternal family's shaman. He also predicted that her work would suffer in the near future. She recounted that although her work was fine when she saw the aura reader, it did indeed suffer after visiting him. She told me that she was uncertain of whether this was caused by the prediction's psychological effects on her or if it reflected the accuracy of his reading. Upon completing the analysis, the aura reader recommended that she should buy some candles to cleanse and heal her aura (and therefore any potential future difficulties) for 600,000 *tögrögs* (at that time a rather exorbitant US\$300). Stunned by this extra cost, she replied that she would not be able to afford such a steep price. To her surprise, rather than continuing to sell her the candles as the only possible cure, he told her not to worry. If she could not afford to buy the candles, she could go three times to a Buddhist temple to have some prayers read, or alternatively visit her family's shaman once.²

This instance of incorporating technology and the idea of science into a healing practice is not unusual in Ulaanbaatar.³ The incorporation of a computer lends the reading an authenticity (and perceived objectivity) associated with technology, and by implication incorporates scientific empiricism into the practice. When I carried out fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar at Buddhist centres and temples from 2009 to 2010 and again in 2013, 2015 and 2016, science (*shinjleh uhaan*) was frequently used as yardstick by which the validity of ritual practices, Buddhist, non-Buddhist and others, were measured.⁴ As is now common in Buddhist reform movements elsewhere (Lopez 2008; Samuel 2014), many urban Mongols referred to scientific proof or methods when discussing religion as a

way of highlighting the strength of religious practices. Scientific epistemologies were referred to as a way of measuring the knowledge and ignorance of religious practitioners and lay people. At the same time, the limitations of science or allopathic medicine to heal or diagnose highlighted the power of religious specialists and ritual practices.

These sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, ideas of how science and religion relate to one another have historical roots in the European New Religious Movements at the turn of the twentieth century. These movements were influential in the changing ways that Buddhism was practiced around the world in the twentieth century and in the *mélange* of science and mystical exploration that have at times flourished during and after the socialist period. This article will explore the unique relationships that contemporary Mongolian healing practices have with these overlapping histories. It will also emphasize how, rather than being a recipient of imported new religious ideas, the Mongolian cultural region played an important role in the genesis of these movements at the *fin de siècle* and throughout the socialist period. The Mongolian cultural region, both as an exoticized imaginary and a source of texts, scholars and inspiration, has consistently discoursed with European, Soviet and American spiritualist and Buddhist movements. When Mongolian aura readers, new religious practitioners or Buddhists refer to science or use technology to demonstrate the validity of ritual practice, these ideas often contain echoes of these interconnecting histories.

Mysticism and science

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and the Soviet Union, the boundaries between science, politics and mysticism were often blurred. Explorations into human immortality, the search for mystical creatures and the development of paranormal capacities frequently went beyond the realm of the occult societies, spilling over into state-sponsored expeditions marked by political intrigue and scientific pursuits. In what follows I will outline a few of the many religious and philosophical movements that were characteristic of the relationship between science and mysticism during this period, with an eye to understanding how contemporary Mongolian healing practices have been influenced by these historical lineages.

The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831–91) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and others, was one of the most prominent European occult movements of the mid-eighteenth century and the *fin de siècle*. The Theosophical Society romantically engaged the philosophical traditions and religious practices of Asia at a time when the European colonial project was facilitating Christian missionary activities. The society influenced the trajectory of religious practices in Asia along with the birthing of new occult practices and broader philosophical changes in Europe (Rudbøg and Sand 2020). They enabled new engagements between European intellectuals and Asian religious traditions, inviting religious specialists and scholars to lecture about Asian religious ideas and practices in European salons. Believing that all religious traditions conversed with the same mystical truths, their founders saw their mission as accessing the occult knowledges and methods that had been protected from modernity in a ‘timeless, Oriental realm of wisdom and spirituality’ (Patridge 2020, 20). They imagined themselves as being on a project to unite ‘all spheres of knowledge, science, and esoteric thought, as well as Eastern and Western systems’ (17).

One of their founders, Blavatsky was born in Tsarist Russia in 1831, in a part of the Russian Empire that is now in Ukraine. She was a prolific writer and well-known spiritual medium leading up to the *fin de siècle*. In European intellectual circles some considered her to be a travelling mystic-scholar who was able to impart knowledge from the Far East, whilst others considered her to be a fraud (Asprem 2014; Viswanathan 2018). She claimed to have clairvoyant capacities and wrote texts that she said were inspired by her communication with spiritual forces. Her books, such as *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), were engaged by many of the intellectuals of the period and in subsequent decades. Some of these were mentioned to me by Mongolian friends and acquaintances as a direct source of inspiration for religious practices in the post-socialist period. Blavatsky travelled extensively in Asia, including in India and Sri Lanka with Olcott, though it is likely that some of her stated adventures to Tibet (where she claimed to have studied for seven years under spiritual masters) were elaborations based upon other travelogues of the period (Patridge 2020, 18). Whether or not her travels to Tibet were true, she did visit Kalmykia as a child, and as an adult had extensive contacts with the well-known Buryat scholar, diplomat, potential spy and tutor to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Lama Agvan Dorjiev (1853–1938). A sought-after lecturer at the Theosophical Society in Paris, Dorjiev was a Tibetan ambassador to Beijing and a confidant of Tsar Nikolai during the Russian Empire (King 2019, 59). After the Russian Revolution, Lama Dorjiev tried to curry favour with the new regime by stressing the compatibility of Buddhism with socialism, but was killed during the fraught political climate of the late 1930s (60).

The Theosophical Society's extensive and prolonged engagements with Asian religions to a certain extent led them away from over-romanticizing and over-simplifying 'Eastern' religions, and many of their members were outspoken opponents of the Christian missionary activities that were accompanying colonial projects in Asia (Lopez 2020). In spite of their extensive engagements, much of the differences between religious traditions were lost in communication. Blavatsky, for instance, continued to posit an absolute unity of religious traditions, writing that 'the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion' was 'the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology' (Blavatsky [1877] 2006, vi). Rather than attempting to engage Asian religious traditions on their own terms, the Theosophical Society was biased by its search to find the 'core' of all religions and its members' prejudiced ideas about race (Patridge 2020). The Theosophical Society wanted to understand Asian occult practices which it believed had better preserved their mystical underpinning whilst those in the 'Occident' had been lost due to modernization. They saw themselves as uncovering essential unifying religious understandings or lost knowledge (Lopez 2020), a project thought to be compatible with the development of science and new technologies. As Asprem (2014) argues, rather than seeing themselves as opposed to science, the Theosophical Society believed that through developing deepened occult perceptions that they could bridge the epistemological gap that science at the time had 'between the representation of unobservable entities and the desire for a position of scientific *realism* about entities such as atoms and electrons' (447). As Asprem continues, 'Occult chemistry offered an unusual answer to the epistemological problem of representation' ... 'it promised a method of direct perception, a vision beyond ordinary sight' (448).

In the intellectual circles of the *fin de siècle*, scientists were often involved with the same occult activities and investigations that were common in the parlour rooms of

aristocratic and middle-class Victorian Britain. It was not unusual for well-regarded scientists of the era to combine ideas of the supernatural with their otherwise materialist scientific theories (Collins 2015, 427). Some well-known scientists of the era were members of, or were connected to, the Theosophical Society. Renowned British naturalist Alfred Wallace (1823–1913), who co-discovered evolution at the same time as Charles Darwin, corresponded by mail with Blavatsky and was himself an engaged spiritualist. Unlike Darwin's theory of natural selection, which states that evolutionary changes are largely governed by the adaptive benefits or deficits bestowed by chance mutations, Wallace attempted to convince his scientific colleagues in the 1860s (without success) that evolution was guided by the invisible beings that were communicated with through séances (Chajes 2019, 5).

This mixing of scientific and occult explorations carried over from the *fin de siècle* into the twentieth century, including into the volatile environment of post-revolutionary Russia. Members of occult groups were foundational to the Soviet Union's space programme. As Siddiqi (2008) writes, the enthusiasm for space that was present during and after the 1920s was influenced by two separate intellectual lineages: 'technological utopianism' and 'Cosmism'. The former (seemingly modern, urban, international, materialist) clashed and meshed with the latter (superficially archaic, pastoral, Russian, spiritual), creating a complex ideological context for popular interest in spaceflight' (262). One of the founding fathers of astronautics, Russian autodidact mathematician Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935), was also a philosopher and avid eugenicist who wrote texts that were integral to the Cosmist movement. As spaceflight was about pushing out of the Earth's atmosphere and liberating humanity from the boundaries of the planet, it was accompanied by new ways of imagining humanity's role in the cosmos. The Cosmists believed that it was part of humanity's destiny to leave the Earth and to colonize space to make room for an expanding population that was to become immortal. He encouraged the idea that humans should endeavour to leave the planet, work towards spiritual and material perfection, and find the source of immortality (Siddiqi 2008). Whilst Tsiolkovskii's mathematical theories (and extra-terrestrial imaginings) were key to the development of the Soviet space programme, many of the Cosmists who engaged his philosophical writings through art and literature were exiled or lost their lives during the Soviet Union's Cultural Revolution and the Great Terror (Siddiqi 2008, 286–287).

The popularity of the occult at the turn of the twentieth century continued with the presence of other kinds of mystical inquiries and occult secret societies well into the beginnings of the Soviet Union. Before the Stalinist purges, the occult was not only begrudgingly tolerated, but some members of occult societies also carried out investigations into the paranormal with Soviet state support. The idea that telepathy was a latent human capacity that could be detected and developed, for instance, through scientific methods found its way into the Soviet scientific programmes at various points (Krasz-tev 2019). Some occult researchers, such as the biologist Aleksandr Barchenko (1881–1938), were influenced by Blavatsky's writings. Barchenko initially garnered the state's support for investigations into the paranormal, and at one point received funding (which was later withdrawn) to prepare for an expedition to search for the mythical region of Shambhala that was thought to exist somewhere on the Tibetan plateau or in the Mongolian cultural region. One of the key figures in the search for Shambhala was Gleb Bokii (1879–1937), who was a member of the Secret Police and had been

Lenin's personal secretary (Shishkin 2012). Barchenko and Bokii were both executed in the Great Terror.

After Khrushchev's rise to power in 1953, the loosening of religious oppression led to a flurry of semi-scientific paranormal investigations, some occasioning brief state support, others falling foul of the Politburo. The scientific bodies of the Soviet Union, whilst officially atheist, carried out investigations into the occult at various periods, either as investigations or as an attempt to disprove them. In the 1950s and 1960s the Academy of Science funded research into the possibilities of alien intelligences, UFOs, deep sea voyages to search for Atlantis and expeditions in search of the Abominable Snowman (Menzel 2012, 16; Roeder and Afinogenov 2019).

The period following the ascent of Khrushchev also saw a rekindling of enthusiasm for the writings, practices and artworks of Nicholas (1874–1947) and Helena Roerich (1879–1955). The Roeriches were known for their interest in, and expeditions to, Inner Asia in the early twentieth century and for devising the Theosophically inspired system of Agni Yoga. A prominent artist, Nicholas Roerich designed the stained-glass windows for the first Buddhist temple in Europe, a project initiated by Buryat Lama Agvan Dorjiev (from 1909 to 1915) in St Petersburg (Andreyev 2014, 29). He later reported that it was from a 'learned Buryat lama' during the construction of the temple that he first heard about the kingdom of Shambhala (Andreyev 2014, 29), a topic that had also been touched upon by Blavatsky in her writings. The Roeriches became enthralled with the idea of finding and/or creating the promised land of Shambhala. They carried out expeditions in Mongolia and Central Asia to search for it (including a trip to Inner Asia from 1925 to 1928 and again in 1934–35) and to draw inspiration for their artworks and spiritualist practices (Andreyev 2014; Boyd 2012; Osterrieder 2012, 115). They attempted to sway influence with various political forces, including the Soviet Union and the United States, in order to create a unified Buddhist country that began in Tibet and ended in southern Siberia, with its heart in the Altai mountains. This idea, though seemingly far-fetched, fit with other dharmic and pan-Mongol aspirations of the 1920s, including that of the influential Buryat Lama Agvan Dorjiev and the 'Mad Baron' the White Russian Baron Ungern Von Sternberg, who having liberated Mongolia from Chinese occupiers in 1921 was defeated by the Bolsheviks and executed in the same year (Andreyev 2014). The Roeriches envisioned the Himalayan region and Inner Asia 'as the earthly expression of the invisible kingdom of Shambhala' (Menzel 2012, 25), being convinced for a time that there was a pre-existing network of secret tunnels that connected the Altai mountains to the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Despite their attempts to connect Buddhism to Leninism during their stay in Ulaanbaatar, assisted in part by Helena Roerich's books *Obshchina* (Community, 1926) and *Osnovy Buddizma* (Foundations of Buddhism, 1926), during Stalin's rule they lost Soviet support (Andreyev 2014). After losing Russian assistance they successfully sought funding from wealthy Americans, funding another trip to Inner Mongolia in the 1930s under the pretence of studying plants (Osterrieder 2012). In the late 1980s Gorbachev saw the potential of using the works of the Roeriches to generate a multi-ethnic, attractive and exotic 'Soviet worldview' (McCannon 2012, 351). Whilst this was not successful, the influence of the Roeriches and their imaginings of Inner Asia still resonate in Russia in the post-socialist period (McCannon 2012).

After the end of the socialism, the occult imaginaries of the *fin de siècle* and the twentieth century continued to influence popular religious practices. In sociological surveys

carried out in 1991, 1992 and 1996, Russian and Finnish researchers found that 41% of 'traditional believers' of Orthodox Christianity believed in reincarnation (Furman 1998). In Russia during the 1990s, 36% of all non-fiction publications in the humanities were about occult or esoteric topics (Menzel 2012, 13). Many of these occult books have been translated into Mongolian and are widely available for sale in bookstores. Along with Buddhism and shamanism, many of my Mongolian interlocutors incorporated ideas and practices from ex-Soviet and Euro-American lineages of New Religious Movements, which themselves have been extensively influenced by the Mongolian cultural region.

Following the loosening of religious restrictions after 1990 in Mongolia, the ideas and practices associated with these historical periods have had ramifications for how urban Mongols interpret and engage ritual practices of healing. Attitudes toward the relationship between science and religion seem to have been influenced by these new religious lineages. These include the idea that there is one underlying spiritual truth that all religions speak to and that this underlying truth can be accessed methodologically. During a formal interview in 2009 with middle-aged government worker Sarantuya, she told me that:

Generally, my approach to religion is ... scientific. As you know Chinggis Khan respected all religion. I think that he liked to say, 'we are living under the one sky'. It means I think that he means that there is only one God. But the approaches are in different ways. They are talking about the one thing from different sides.

As Sarantuya explained further, religious traditions, rather than speaking to different, incompatible fundamentals, operate as a kind of clothing that cover shared mystical truths. Just as the aura reader told Enkhjargal that there were several available healing practices that could cleanse her aura, Sarantuya explained to me that all religions contained methods for healing and spiritual exploration. This was a relatively consistent attitude among the people with whom I carried out research. The idea that a specific religion has exclusive access to the truth was only prominent among the small number of friends and acquaintances who had visited Evangelical Christian churches in the capital. Many people who had visited Christian churches told me that although they had been instructed to only visit churches by priests and other church attendees, that they largely ignored this suggestion.

The idea that religion as a method of exploration was as valuable as, and completely compatible with, science, as expressed by Sarantuya, was also common among other people that I spoke to. As she continued:

My understanding of religion is more scientific. I understand that there is some kind of energetic wave and I believe that there is some God. ... The middle way is my approach. ... In the future I have a goal to meditate and to understand the meaning of the life as taught by Buddhism. ... I already have some knowledge about Christianity and a little bit about Islam. ... I found out that ... something is the same in those religions.

The key to her approach to religion, she told me, was to be methodical and systematic, akin to scientific investigations. Sarantuya had carried out these investigations by talking to others, visiting temples, and by attending Buddhist and other religious teachings. In common with around half of my lay Buddhist interlocutors that I spoke to in 2009 and 2010, Sarantuya, along with visiting Buddhist temples had been to a Sri Sri Ravi

Shankar meditation course (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2019). Sri Sri, as he is generally known, is a popular spiritual guru from India who has visited Mongolia and received commendations from the Mongolian government for his work. His group in Mongolia, led at that time by an influential Mongolian teacher called Sara, leads weeklong urban meditation retreats where the attendees are given physical and breathing exercises, asked to refrain from eating meat, and are given lectures on karma and environmentalism (amongst other things). Sarantuya had also been to meditation classes with a Thai monk who had described to the class several scientific studies into the benefits of meditation. Meditation, he had said, decreases one's blood pressure and the appearance of cancer. Like most of my interlocutors Sarantuya saw no contradiction with the inclusion of science into Buddhist and other ritual practices. Meditation, in particular, was akin to the scientific method, and its benefits could be measured and understood through technology.

Buddhist reform and science

Buddhist reform movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have also had significant consequences for the expectations of what can and should be known and practiced amongst Mongolian urbanites. After 1990, global Buddhist reform movements came to Mongolia with the hope of helping to reseed Buddhism, and many Mongols have trained abroad among the Tibetan diaspora in India (and elsewhere). Alongside shifting local expectations of religion that occurred with the appropriation of Buddhist terms in the socialist period, global reform Buddhist movements have influenced Mongolian religious practices, carrying with them changing expectations about Buddhism (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2019). These translocal interactions have had consequences for how the urban Mongols that I spoke to view the relationship between religious-based healing and science.

The Theosophical Society had a significant influence upon the Buddhist reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were to transform ideas about Buddhist practice and knowledge. In 1880, Olcott arrived in Sri Lanka with Blavatsky to learn more about Buddhism and to encourage Buddhist practice in the face of Christian missionary activity which they saw as eroding 'Oriental' traditions and therefore the mystical truths to which these traditions gave form. After arriving they both took the five lay Buddhist vows. As Lopez Jr writes, they viewed the Buddha as a philosopher whose teaching were 'based on reason and restraint, opposed to ritual, superstition, and sacerdotalism, demonstrating how the individual could live a moral life without the trappings of institutional religion' (Lopez 2008, 12). Scientific framing was an important aspect of the Theosophical Society's approach. For instance, when discussing the light emanating from the Buddha after his enlightenment, Olcott responded that this light was the 'Human Aura', a light that has been scientifically supported by the experiments of Baron von Reichenbach, through photography (Lopez 2008, 12). The teachings of the Buddha, as they saw them, were to be found in the core texts of the Pali cannon, not in the worship of relics, an idea which would later alienate some of their Southeast Asian students.

Olcott and Blavatsky's Sri Lankan protégé, who came to be known as Anagārika Dharmapāla, had a profound impact on the development of new forms of Buddhism in Sri

Lanka and elsewhere. After meeting Olcott and Blavatsky when he was sixteen, Dharmapāla travelled to the Theosophical Society's headquarters in Madras (now Chennai) to study the occult with Blavatsky. Blavatsky, already having taken the vows of a lay Buddhist, encouraged him to study Pali and research the Theravada canon, which at the time were thought to be the foundational texts of Buddhism. Dharmapāla went on to be an influential Buddhism reformer (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Having himself studied in Christian missionary schools he was able to debate as a young Buddhist with Christian philosophers and religious studies scholars in English, arguing that Buddhism was equal, if not superior to, Christian teachings (Lopez 2020, 12–16).

In his address to the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 ... he had proclaimed, 'Buddhism is a scientific religion, in as much as it earnestly enjoins that nothing whatever be accepted on faith. Buddha has said that nothing should be believed merely because it is said. Buddhism is tantamount to a knowledge of other sciences'. (47–48)

Later distancing himself from the Theosophical Society, Dharmapāla argued for a rationalistic view of Buddhism as a religion with core texts and systematic methods compatible with science. In doing so, he affected changing attitudes towards Buddhism and shifted ideas about what lay people could and ought to know about religion. Dharmapāla himself was not a monastic for most of his life and believed that the laity should engage more directly the teachings of the Buddha, rather than relying on merit accrued through supporting monastics. Following from Protestant ideas about the laity engaging religious texts, he thought that Buddhists should learn from the core texts of Buddhism and carry out Buddhist contemplative practices (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). As Dharmapāla was impacting the transformation of religious practice in Sri Lanka, reform movements in Thailand, in conversation with other Buddhist reformers in Southeast Asia, were transforming religious practice in reaction to colonial forces and Protestant missionaries. Southeast Asian Buddhist reformers encouraged a rekindling of meditative practices and the idea that Buddhism, rather than being a mystical religion was rationally based and followed scientific methods (Cook 2010).

Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna lineages of Buddhism have been transformed by changing global expectations around religion, including the impacts of socialist-style atheism. In Mongolia, as in several other countries where Buddhism was the dominant religion in the early twentieth century, most of the leading figures in the monastic establishment were violently purged. Political changes brought about by socialism and war caused high-profile religious teachers to flee or forced them into exile, including the charismatic Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. Tibetans in diaspora and Vietnamese monastics set up centres in conversation with the expectations of their new followers in India, Europe, Australasia and North America, transforming Buddhist practices globally. The first Varjayāna Buddhist centre in the United States was set up by a Kalmyk Buddhist, Geshe Wangyal, who, having escaped the socialist persecutions of the 1930s, started a Buddhist centre in New Jersey in 1955 (Ignacio Cabezón 2006, 97).

In dynamic engagement with local ideas and practices Buddhism in Mongolia has been influenced by these global movements. Following the end of the socialist period, some local Mongols who had been in monasteries as young men before the purges of the late 1930s became lamas again and took on young disciples. Initially,

as old Mongolian lamas revived or built new temples, these enterprises were enthusiastically supported by many local herders and urbanites (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2021; Teleki 2009). While these local lamas renovated old temples and built new ones in the 1990s, figures, such as the Ladakhi-born Indian ambassador Bakula Rinpoche, encouraged the invigoration of Buddhist practices by building temples (such as Betüv Hiid) and helping to fund young students to study Buddhism among the monasteries of the Tibetan diaspora in India.

While reform movements were transforming global lineages of Buddhism elsewhere, the socialist period's appropriation of key Buddhist terms and metaphors have had ramifications for contemporary healing practices in Mongolia. As the Buddhist missionaries before them saw themselves as bringing 'light' (*gerel*) to the northern nomads (Kollmar-Paulenz 2014), the socialist government saw themselves as bringing light to pastoralists in the form of education, medicine and electricity. When infrastructure was built to bring electricity to the countryside in the 1930s and 1940s in Mongolia and in Central Asia it was called (*Ilyichiin Gerel*) Lenin's Light (Féaux de la Croix 2014; Sneath 2009). The light that the socialist regime was using to illuminate the night was literally and figuratively linked to the Renaissance idea of enlightenment as knowledge and transcendence (Sneath 2009). As electric light was being introduced to the steppe, the term *gegeerel* (enlightenment) was appropriated to refer to those who were learned, rather than the pursuit of spiritual attainment. *Gegeerel* transitioned in its meaning to refer to secular education; enlightenment became democratized. No longer reserved for the attainment of a few high lamas, it became available to lay women and men (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2019; Kaplonski 2014). Literacy programmes spread across the country and enlightenment in its new meaning was both the possibility and the responsibility of Mongolian citizens in the socialist era (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2019).

Buddhist reform movements along with socialist transformations have changed ideas of what can and should be known about Buddhism in the contemporary era. Knowledge of Buddhism, rather than being reserved for those who are enlightened (Cassaniti 2006) is now something that people often told me was possible, although difficult, time consuming and best left for the latter years of one's life (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2019). For many of the lay Buddhists that I spoke to and practiced with expectations about what one ought to know about Buddhist practice have changed. Whilst most told me that it would be difficult to find enlightenment (*gegeerel oloh*), many also explained that they either did not know enough about Buddhism, or that they were attempting to learn more about Buddhist practice. A common critique of Buddhist lamas was that they lacked the necessary education about Buddhism. For example, middle-aged government worker Batu told me in the winter of 2010, the 'lamas' education, lamas capacity is low. Buddhism is a science, they must learn ... and then people can believe them'. Rather than focusing on knowledge transmission through rebirth lineages, most urban lay Buddhists that I spoke to framed 'good Buddhists' as those who were knowledgeable and had a good education (Abrahms-Kavunenکو 2019).

In Mongolia the idea that Buddhism is a science was common among my interlocutors. Many described how they had seen talks that had explained Buddhism in a scientific way given by local monastics, visiting Buddhists or high lamas, particularly from those who are connected to global Buddhist institutions. For instance, when interviewing a friend, Turuu, in 2015, I asked:

Saskia: What do you think about the teachings of the Dalai Lama?

Turuu: I don't read a lot about his teachings ... I just met him in Canberra. He did a one-hour talk. He said some true things about religion and about how we should see Buddhism. And it makes sense. ... I was convinced that Buddhism was close to science. Because you start to have doubt, you try to prove it, and you prove it wrong. And if you don't have proof [that it is wrong] it is true. The philosophy is there ... compared to Christians, you know, God created you, he wants you to be like this. ... You are a kind of sheep, and he is a shepherd. For me it is very primitive. Because you are sheep, he is the shepherd.

This idea of Buddhism as a science focuses on science as method and includes the empirical processes of doubt, testing and rigour. Within these discourses, belief in certain ideas such as reincarnation and the special capacities of particular teachers (which are present in Mongolian Buddhism) tend to be hidden by foregrounding logical undertakings and an emphasis on education.

The idea of systematic and gradual attainment, albeit over many, many lifetimes, was also present in educationally oriented Buddhist centres in the capital. When Lama Zorigt, a Mongolian lama then in his 20s, taught Buddhism to his lay students in 2009 and 2010 in Ulaanbaatar at a centre funded by an Irish Buddhist non-governmental organization (NGO) headed by Tibetan-born Panchen Ötrul Rinpoche, he frequently used allopathic and scientific metaphors to convey his ideas. At the beginning of his teachings of the *Lam Rim Chen Mo* he taught that there are six things that could help assist you in your understanding of the teachings. First, he told us to consider ourselves as though we were patients: the three vices of anger, desire and ignorance make us sick. Second, reflect on the idea that dharma is the medicine, and that knowledge of it helps us to reduce our bad karma. Third, see your teacher as a doctor. Fourth, try to remember that the illness is going away, learning the dharma helps to reduce the three vices by reducing bad thoughts and actions and therefore reducing bad karma. Fifth, remember that the Buddha found the truth, the Buddha reached enlightenment and that is why we should learn his teachings. Finally, we can all benefit from this truth. The dharma should always be taught to help people, much as a doctor works to help the sick. Like Sarantuya's understanding of systematic knowledge acquisition, the *Lam Rim* was taught methodologically and frequently contained numbered lists.

Having said this, what constitutes knowledge and education about Buddhism was different among the people that I spoke to. Several lamas who had spent many years studying in India told me that when they returned their families were dismayed by the lack of apparent knowledge that they had about astrology and rituals for efficacy. Some told me that their explanations of what they did in India, following from their rigorous study of Buddhist philosophy in monasteries, were met with misunderstanding. As Lama Otgonbaatar during an interview in 2016 explained to me, when he returned, he felt:

Just like a monkey lost in a forest, I didn't know what to do. Your relatives start questioning 'Hey, you studied there for 8–9 years what can you do?' Then you start going down the wrong road ... start with fortune telling [*mergeh tölgö taviij*], start lying, and then performing rituals whether you are capable or not. ... Not one lay person asked about what I learned, which is Buddhist philosophy, instead they come with requests 'I want this thing done, I want that thing secured'.

Partly as the result of these and other experiences, Lama Otgonbaatar built a Sakya monastery with foreign and local funding that contains residential quarters for lamas to the east of the city centre. Whilst education is often seen as part of being a good monastic and a good lay Buddhist, there are many different ideas of what constitutes knowledge and education (see also Jonutyè 2020 regarding similar themes in Buryatia).

Transcending science

Whilst Buddhist and other ritual practices borrow the prestige of science to highlight their efficacy, rituals are frequently discussed as transcending the limitations of science and allopathic medicine. Just as scientific epistemologies are referred to as a way of measuring the capacity of Buddhist lamas, the boundaries of scientific explanations are used as a yardstick against which rituals frequently surpass. The lack of capacity of medical doctors or scientists to provide convincing explanations or cure illnesses was often referred to, to demonstrate the power of ritual practices. Whilst science could, for instance, prove that meditating monks are reducing their heart rate, it was Buddhism, rather than science that was causing the change. In this way, science confirms the efficacy of practice, but cannot by itself provide an explanation or a cure.

Several people told me stories of friends, family members or acquaintances with intractable or undiagnosed illnesses who recovered after becoming shamans. Others explained that when a family member became sick, they would seek the assistance of allopathic medicine as well as a number of ritual specialists to aid in that person's recovery. Some told me that when a family member became well again, they were not sure what was the reason for this recovery, whether it was the shaman they had visited, the Buddhist lamas who had read prayers or the doctor from the hospital. As 39-year-old meteorologist, Tuyaa said to me after visiting a shaman when her son had hepatitis, 'Did it help or the doctor help? I don't know.'

Some people were more inclined to recognize the efficacy of religious practice over medical interventions. As one friend told me of her sister's quick recovery following serious burns:

She was staying in the hospital and for a few days and she wasn't able to walk. Then my mother went to the lama to ask him to pray ... and then my mother and I came to the hospital and I saw one girl and she was walking with new boots. And those shoes, actually my mum bought for my sister and then I said ... 'oh these shoes are the same as my sister's' ... we looked up and it was my sister! She was running and the mother of her roommate said, 'your sister was running all day!' ... That lama read very good prayers ... some of them helped her!!

In other cases the healing of illnesses was attributed to the restoration of an icon to a shrine, offerings made to spirits, or making a connection with the family's ancestral spirits. When talking to religious store owner Gerelmaa about ritual vases (*bumba*) used for appeasing water spirits she explained:

Gerelmaa: A lot of herders move from one place to the other. When they settle in a new place, they make offerings to the water spirits [*lus*] in that land. ... There are instances where people have been cursed by water spirits. It can happen because they damaged the soil in a forbidden area, or cut the trees of their land. People believe that this makes the spirits [*lus savdag*] angry and vengeful.

- Saskia: How does that person know that they've been cursed?
- Gerelmaa: For example, they can fall ill or things might not go well in their work. They will go see a lama or astrologer and ask them for guidance. Sometimes they might get rashes on their arms or legs that won't go away. They might get sick but they don't know why.

Illness often leads people to seek out ritual specialists in addition to allopathic interventions. Stories of scientists identifying or registering a phenomenon without being able to offer an explanation were common. For instance, I was told by three unconnected people that scientists had measured the weight of the human body at the moment of death and had found that the weight of the body had decreased by a couple of grams.⁵ These friends and acquaintances all referred to this experiment as a demonstration that human bodies have a soul (*süns*) and that the soul weighed something. Likewise, the imperishable body of Lama Itigelov in Buryatia was referred to as an example of science unable to provide a convincing explanation to account for his body's miraculous lack of decomposition, indicating the transcendence of Buddhist practices over the limitations of material sciences. Lama Itigelov died before the socialist purges in Siberia in 1927. He instructed his attendants to bury his body following his death and to dig it up 30 years after his death. When his disciples disinterred his body, they found that it had not decomposed. In accordance with his wishes the body was again interred and left until 2002 when it was again disinterred still not having gone through ordinary kinds of decay. As scientists have not been able to come up with a persuasive story that accounts for his lack of decomposition, he is believed by some to still be meditating. For others his body was left as a powerful sacred relic to inspire Buddhist practice in the contemporary period (Bernstein 2013, 270; Jonutyte 2019; Quijada 2012).

Conclusions

Like many urban Mongols who combine different practices for diagnosis and healing, Enkhjargal now regularly practices yoga and gets her aura read, along with visiting her family shaman. She currently visits an aura reader who she told me calibrates her aura/chakra reading by placing metal pins that touch her hands to connect to a computer by a wire. The computer calibrates the readings, demonstrating how well one's chakras are functioning. In the pictures she sent me from early 2020, when Enkhjargal had not been keeping up her yoga practice for a couple of months, the aura reading calibrated some slight blockages in her chakras. The most affected chakra was functioning at 77.78% its capacity, with others fairing up to 88.62%. From these specific readings, the computer-generated picture of her aura shows a disrupted sphere encircling a computer-generated body. The sphere is not symmetrical, being compressed at various points, particularly around the centre. In the next reading, taken a week later after Enkhjargal had restarted her yoga routine, the blockages around her chakras were no longer showing up on the reading. This time the coloured chakras were all at 100%. The sphere enclosing the computer-generated image is symmetrical, demonstrating that her aura is as it should be. As she messaged me 'you need to charge your battery regularly. Yoga and meditation recharge you 😊'.

Just as Enkhjargal's aura readings blend technology (and, by implication, science) with more esoteric ideas and practices, the blurring of science and religion/ritual is common in

the present era. In popular Euro-American secular understandings, science and technology are often thought of as undermining the validity of religious claims. In contemporary Mongolia, as elsewhere (Stolow 2013), science and ritual (or at least the ideas of science and ritual) are and have often been collaborators, as well as being occasionally antagonistic. Just as the inclusion of a computer in an aura reading is not particularly unusual, religion and science tend to have dialogical effects on one another. In Mongolia this dialogue has contributed to epistemological changes in religious practices and fluid ideas about what exactly science is and can do. Whilst the ideals of science, in particular proof and methodology, have transformed Mongolian Buddhist religious epistemologies, both the prestige and limitations of science and allopathic healing can strengthen the standing of ritual practices. Ritual specialists often borrow the prestige of science, only to transcend the limitations of scientific explanations or evidenced based healing practices.

The historical connections between the Mongolian cultural region and the spiritualist movements of the *fin de siècle* continue to have ramifications for how science and religion are approached in the contemporary era. Emerging alongside other practices, Russian-influenced new religious movements and global Buddhist reform movements discourse with Mongolian ritual practices. By following a few key historical lineages that are connected to Mongolia, one can see ideas about science as a kind of methodological approach, and as a means of developing understanding, have significant consequences for how people approach religion and ritual specialists in the contemporary era. Rather than being separate from the ideas and practices of the Mongolian cultural region and imported from outside, there has been considerable interactions between them, even when the imagined other (i.e., science and Buddhism) has not been always accurately translated. Over the last one hundred and fifty years there are clear ways in which religion and science have co-arisen in dialogue with one another as relatively permeable categories.

Notes

1. Leadbeater was also responsible for popularizing the idea of chakras.
2. The interchangeable nature of the rituals for efficacy prescribed by the aura reader is not uncommon in Ulaanbaatar as it is common for urbanities to believe in the efficacy of many different kinds of ritual practices (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015).
3. Or indeed elsewhere, see Stolow 2013.
4. Rather than using other criteria such as falsifiability or predictive capacity, the tacit definitions of science in this paper adhere as closely as possible to those defined by my Mongolian interlocutors. In some ways *shinjleh uhaan* resembles the German idea of *Wissenschaft* more than it does the idea of science in English. Much like *Wissenschaft*, Mongolian approaches to science, at least among my interlocutors, included the humanities and a general idea of scholarship aimed at learning and the acquisition of knowledge. For those who employed the idea in conversations and interviews, the idea of science included a kind of methodological approach rooted in empiricism or through the employment of technology, education over a period of time (in any field), and the more general idea of a system of knowledge with an extensive written or oral history which can be transmitted from one person to another through written and/or oral sources.
5. This refers to the controversial experiments carried out on six dying patients by American physician Duncan MacDougall, published in 1907.

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