

FACES OF MONGOLIAN FEAR: DEMONOLOGICAL BELIEFS, NARRATIVES AND PROTECTIVE MEASURES IN CONTEMPORARY FOLK RELIGION*

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the perceptions of fear and ‘the frightening’ in contemporary Mongolian demonology. In the article, I discuss beliefs concerning both human and supernatural – what is supposed to be frightening for humans and what is supposed to be frightening for spirits, ghosts and demons. In daily interaction with the supernatural this mutual ‘fright’ can be regarded as an important part of communication. In this article, I discuss what is believed to be the most frightful for humans and for supernatural agents, what kinds of image this fear relates to and what the roots of these beliefs are, as well as the popular ways to confront and defend against ‘frightening’ in Mongolian folklore.

My research is based on fieldwork materials collected during annual expeditions in different parts of Mongolia (2006–2017) and Mongolian published sources such as Mongolian newspapers and journals, special editions of stories about encounters with the supernatural.

KEYWORDS: Mongolian folklore • narratives • rites • fears • socialist past and contemporary period.

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Fear might be regarded as one of universals presented in any culture of any period, although in each tradition fear has different faces, being embodied in a variety of languages, images, plots, local beliefs, folk characters, etc.¹ Among the diversity of frightening the supernatural takes a significant place even today, remaining a consistently popular object of fear. Below in this article I distinguish and discuss different types of Mongolian supernatural fear, such as demonic fear, respectful fear, the fear of an uncertain malevolence influence. Each type is connected with certain objects and subjects and is embodied in different supernatural characters. I also discuss some of the basic ideas that form the specific perceptions of fear in contemporary Mongolian folklore, such as the fear of fear, the mental vulnerability of humans and the physical sensibility of ghosts and demons. There is a peculiarity to Mongolian fear, rooted as it is in a diversity of beliefs that might be associated with the different traditions alloyed in Mongolian vernacular culture, including traditional folk beliefs, Shamanic (Khangalov 1959; Humphrey 1996) and Buddhist beliefs and ritual practices, and pseudoscientific and atheistic ideas.

AN ATTEMPT TO OVERCOME SUPERNATURAL FEAR

As countless examples have already shown, belief in the supernatural is something that cannot be suppressed or displaced by education, progress, ideology or even repression.² During the socialist period (1924–1996), Mongolia faced activities typical to communist regimes such as its own cultural revolution and persecution of religion (Kaplonski 2004; Morozova 2009). These dramatic events had a crucial influence on Mongolian culture, religious life, folklore, and in particular, attitudes toward the supernatural. The supernatural was included under the label ‘superstitions’ on the list of forbidden discussion topics and was attacked by official ideology and ‘atheistic’ culture. This period might be taken as a state attempt to overcome supernatural fear. Basically, this attempt was performed in two ways: by the physical persecution of religious specialists and followers, and through ideological activity (propaganda work, including meeting and talking with religious specialists and lay people). This policy gave the supernatural a special status, underlining the topic and genres connected with it. Today some people still remember the following anecdote from those times:

In the 1930s and 1940s a communist came to talk to cattlemen and gave them a lecture, saying that spirits and demons do not exist.

“They do!” – said one old man. “I saw them with my own eyes, I met them.”

Then the propagandist thought a bit and responded: “If I say that demons exist it will be bad for me, if I say that they do not exist, then it will be bad for you... Let’s say that during the revolution the number of demons has decreased!” (FM 2008: R. Ch., 1946, Khalh)

Many everyday rituals were also forbidden, leading to them being performed less frequently. As the number of demons and ghosts decreased during the revolution, nature spirits were left without offerings and rituals and so reduced their activity; according to the words of one interviewee they “fell asleep” (FM 2011: D. D., 1942, Khalh).

People also remember the fear of talking about this kind of fear once such discussions were regarded as the crime of spreading rumour and superstition, which could be followed by state persecution. At the end of narratives describing events from the past some of our interviewees add a common detail:

After this accident happened a guy from the Security Committee came and asked us about everything. He wrote down all our words and said to keep our tongues locked inside our mouths. Thus, even today we are still living absolutely silently [ironically]. (Tsermaa 2006: 14)

This contestation between folk and official views of the supernatural was also reflected in popular narratives, in which the atheist and official propagandist has the role of victim of an encounter with a supernatural being. In such plots the fear that the poor atheist experiences when facing a ghost or a demon whose existence he refuted is an important part of the narrative, emphasized by the teller as evidence that the truth has triumphed.

Once one propagandist of scientific atheism came to the *hadoo*.³ He was going to a distant settlement to give a lecture about the fight against superstition, but by the afternoon he made it only half way and reached the centre of the province. To go farther he had to take a motorbike with a local driver. People explained to the propagandist that there are two routes to his destination: one of them safe and smooth, but long, the other short but has a bad reputation, it is a bad road, dangerous to pass.

“What nonsense!” Said the atheist. “In the evening I should give a lecture and come back already. Why should I waste my time? Let’s go by the short road!”

They went. On the way, when the sun had already started to set, the lector, sitting on the back seat, heard a strange noise like dimensional claps. He turned to see what it was and... saw an absolutely naked female, very huge, she was running very fast, catching them, and the noise he heard was the sound of her feet touching the ground. He was deathly scared and started to bang his fists on the driver’s back, screaming “Faster! Faaaster!” The driver turned and saw the woman and stepped on the gas. The barely broke away from the chase and reached their destination.

In the evening the propagandist gave a lecture about the harm of the superstitions and stayed at that settlement for the night. The next morning, when everything was done and he was going to leave, people told him that there were two roads back: one of them long and smooth and another one short, but...

“No no, certainly let’s go by the good road, what is the hurry?” (Neklyudov 2008: 68)

Attempts to overcome supernatural fear ended in fiasco. In spite of official sanctions spirits and demons still lived in everyday beliefs, narratives and rites. People kept talking about the supernatural, and some even started to collect stories, as forbidden and remarkable knowledge, “valuable for future generations” (Tsermaa 2006: 2).

A REVIVAL OF THE SUPERNATURAL

With the collapse of the socialist regime the process of religious revival started. Forbidden topics were no longer forbidden and official atheism gave up under a huge wave of interest in different kinds of the spiritual and mystical (both traditional and foreign). In this situation (probably together with the social instability which came with rapid changes in different realms of Mongolian society after the collapse of the socialist state) fear gained a new, luxurious position. The number of demons and ghosts started to increase again in accordance with the number of gods: "Where there is a god, there is a demon, nowadays again many temples are open so demons also multiply" (FM 2009: H. N., 1967, Khalh). Nature spirits woke up and started to demand more attention and more offerings: "During the socialist time nature spirits were sleeping, now they are waking up and demanding offerings. One man passed *oboo*,⁴ did not stop, did not leave anything for the spirits, drove a bit father and crashed his car." (FM 2011: D. Ts., 1942, Khalh)

In addition, fear of the supernatural itself became one of the most popular themes of contemporary culture, appearing in the arts (contemporary literature with supernatural characters, ghosts and demons, paintings with portraits of demonic females, etc.), entertainment production (special horror themed rooms, movies) and the media (newspapers, journal, Internet – including Facebook – communities devoted to the supernatural, the demonic and the frightening).

So, the frightening supernatural in contemporary Mongolia has high popularity and is in special demand, being involved in various functions in different realms of life. Below I discuss some specific features of this fear in contemporary Mongolian everyday life as it is reflected in and by folklore.

DEMONIC FEAR

According to the Mongolian language we can assume that Mongolian culture is a very brave one: there is basically only one morpheme to indicate and to express fear, a fright or the frightening. The basic root for this lexis is *ai/aih* – to be scared; *aimshigtai* – frightening; *aimar* – terrible in the meaning of an amplifying particle (Pyrubeyev 2001: 2).

Regarding Mongolian supernatural characters who are supposed to be frightening we can find a variety of images that represent the face of fear. Some of them are specified and focus on the certain social groups, for example, a character called *mangus* is a very popular object of fear for children. Frequently adults mention his name as a convincing argument for children to behave well: "Don't go there, otherwise *mangus* will come and take you", "stop shouting, *mangus* will hear you and come and eat you", "go to asleep now, otherwise *mangus* will come to eat you", and so on.⁵ The image of this character originally comes from epic and fairy tale traditions. *Mangus* is described as a typical monster: often he is huge, black, with many heads, eating everything he sees – people, caravans, houses, etc. Here is one popular description of terrifying *mangus*:

The claws on his hands grow outside
Like curved steel hooks,
The claws on his feet grow inside,
Like curved steel hooks.
Such a monster he is, people say.

Mangus with his open mouth swallowed a camel with a load and a man. (FM 2007: M. K., 1945, Khalkha)

In addition to this monster serving on the side of parents, Mongolian folklore, as with many other traditions, contains beliefs about demons that are especially dangerous to small children, *ada*,⁶ who might steal or harm them.

Mongolian folklore contains a variety of characters terrifying for adults as well, especially for men. The most popular among them are different kinds of demonic and wild women – *shulmas*, *almas*, *mam*, *muu shubun*. These females (one of whom was chasing the propagandist in the text above) have impressive appearances: they are very big, hairy, with large feet and long breasts hanging down to their knees, they can run very fast following a victim and some of them have steel beaks, or other features of wildness. *Shulmas*, for example, can turn into a dark blue wolf. They are mainly terrifying for men, especial when they travel alone. Such a wild demonic woman can entrap a lonely traveller, take him to her cave, live with him as a family and even give birth to half-human, half-demonic children. However, the consequences of being stolen might be different. In the text below a demonic woman shared her zoomorphic features with the unlucky single traveller.

Once *mam* stole a lonely hunter, hugged him, pressed him to her liver and lay down to rest. Friends of that man found one knowledgeable person and started to ask him for advice. That man said that in the cave on the south side of the black mountain closer than that black mountain *mam* lives. She presses the stolen man against her liver and licks him, where she licks hairs grow. At sunrise that *mam* comes out from her cave to warm her liver. At that time, it is easy to kill her. One good shooter watched her and killed her, and saved his friend. By that time the stolen man was gowned up with hairs all over. His friends took him and brought him to his family. (FM 2006: Zh. N., 1917, Khalh)

Meeting with a wild woman can also end in conflict. One of the narratives tells of a man who went to the forest and met an *almas* women, but instead of stealing him she beat him with her huge breasts and disappeared. Soon after the poor man got sick and died. (FM 2011: N. J., 1948, Khalh)

This type of demonic fear is characterised by specific objects (certain demonic characteristics) and subjects (certain groups of people). In this case, the frightening is well known among culture bearers and concerns different details, including the appearance and behaviour of the demonic beings and the consequences of meeting them. The main cultural function of these characters is to be evil and terrifying.

Another type of fear is a characteristic of relationships between humans and local deities – *genius loci*, nature spirits, patrons of the earth (*lus-sabdag*, *gazarin ezen*). These deities are believed to possess every piece of surrounding landscape – stones, trees, springs, rocks, etc. These spirits are ambivalent towards people: treated well and correctly they are the best helpers and protectors. However, when offended or insulted by incorrect actions they show their powerful and terrifying nature, sending misfortune, bad weather, illness and death to people and cattle. In addition to this, they are believed to have very capricious and moody characters: “*Lus-savdag* are very capricious. If something is a bit wrong they are always ready to ruin people’s lives. If someone travelling just wants to pee, they get angry. Dark or red spots on the earth are their ears.” (FM 2009: A.B., 1954, Khalh) The Mongolian language has a special word for anger that results in harm coming from nature spirits – *lusin horlol*.⁷

The motif of nature spirits’ rage is very popular and deeply entwined with everyday life as a universal explanatory model for different kinds of misfortune in personal and group situations. This is a fear of incorrect actions and a fear of responsibility in the face of furious nature patrons. This motif, of the nature spirits’ revenge, is represented both in narratives and ritual practices. Narratives tell about misfortunes that befell a person or a family or even with a whole community after they settled in the wrong place, cut trees in a forbidden place, killed animals belonged to nature spirits,⁸ dug the earth or even touched a random stone that turned out to be part of the body of a nature spirit, etc. The rage of nature spirits is one of the most popular diagnoses given by religious specialists (lamas, shamans, healers) to a person who complains about his or her life. The diagnoses is usually followed by a range of special rituals performed by specialists in order to calm offended spirits.

Mongolian tradition preserves a large number of different rituals and rites which are supposed to regulate relationships between humans and nature patrons (Zhukovskaya 1977). Among the most popular and important is the ritual of ‘asking for permission’ from nature spirits. It is supposed to be performed before any kind of activity connected to the earth or to the surrounding landscape (building a new house or any even simple construction, digging and mining, choosing a place for funerals, etc.). This ritual at the same time represents the warning of nature spirits about coming danger and payment of compensation for the disturbance. This ritual is supposed to be performed by religious specialists, lamas or shamans. Lots of rituals devoted to nature spirits occurred in the vicinity of their residences – known as *oboo*. Rituals connected to worship of nature spirits might be performed by professionals or lay people, regularly or occasionally, collectively or individually. Another very popular rite – sprinkling the house with milk, also connected with the worship of nature spirit – is part of everyday routine for every Mongolian family. It is usually performed by the oldest woman of the household and represents offerings to the sky, to the earth, and to nature patrons. This rite is supposed to establish correct order in the relationship with local spirits and to get their support for the wellbeing of the household. But if the correct order is already broken then only religious professionals are able to fix it with their prayers, invocations, spells and offerings.

The frightening image of this character was evidently influenced by the Tibetan–Mongolian Buddhist concept of *dokshid*, terrifying wrathful deities, protectors of Dharma, which in Mongolian is often used as an adjective (*dokshid – dokshin*) and included in the descriptions of worshiped places and their patrons. “These mountains are very *dokshid*, I have been working here in the mining company, that is why now I have problems with my health, *dokshid*, wrathful spirits of this place punish me because I disturbed them, disturbed the earth” (FM 2016: B. L., 1973, Khalkha). Apart from rules (do not take anything from the worshiped places, do not leave garbage), many *dokshid* places have *oboo* situated at the tops of mountains, site that females are forbidden to visit. There are some additional taboos at such places, among them a taboo against saying the name of the place – only at a great distance would someone dare to say this name without being scared that the wrathful mountain would hear it and become angry.⁹

This kind of fear might be defined as a respectful fear that characterises and regulates relationships between humans and the surrounding landscape personified through a countless number of patron spirits. This fear is a part of ritual behaviour, representing respect and responsibility (individual and collective). No specific groups are represented as the subject of the fear, i.e. the rage of nature spirits, concerns everyone. Another aspect of this type of fear – in contrast, and emphasised in the collected interviews – is a partial uncertainty about relationships with nature spirits because you never know what you might do wrong to offend them.

THE FEAR OF AN UNCERTAIN MALEVOLENCE INFLUENCES

As I show below, uncertainty is the main feature characterising the fear of another very popular character *chötgör*, probably the most terrifying face in Mongolian folklore. Here is a text written by Mongolian scholar Tsendiyn Damdinsuren¹⁰ (1996: 122–123):

- Gimpel-Guai [personal name] have demons (*chötgör*) at home.
- What are you talking about?
- Today there was something strange. Gimpel-Guai brought home a piece of frozen lamb and put it on the table. Suddenly the lamb’s leg separated from this piece and fell onto the floor. He picked it up and put on the table again. Then it suddenly jumped against the right wall and fell, as if someone threw it, but no one was around. Then his knife also jumped from the table went into this lamb’s leg up to the hilt. Such things are going on.
- It’s all a lie. Don’t be crazy.
- No, no! I’ve seen it with my own eyes!

We came out of the tent and saw that there were lots of people surrounding Gimpel-Guai’s tent and staring at it. The tent was moving and shaking as if somebody was pulling and pushing and hitting it from inside and the noise was as if somebody was throwing everything around inside... but it was empty.

The next day on my way home I was passing Gimpel-Guai’s house again and I saw a piece of felt fly to the tent without a sign of anyone carrying it. Then I decided to keep away from that house. It was something I have really seen. Everybody around was telling each other that there are demons in Gimpel-Guai’s place mak-

ing nasty things all the time, they ripped rosaries, took away wicks from candles and so on. I was not very inspired by visiting his house, but once my friend force me to go there again. We went into the tent and saw our old man sitting calmly and paying no attention to the weird things that were going on around him – his hat was jumping around, dishes rattled, suddenly an axe that was near the fireplace jumped into the air and flew in our direction. Then we ran away...

Chötgör in Mongolian means demon, ghost, the soul of a deceased person. In Mongolian folklore this character is realised through the idea of a soul staying on earth. For different reasons (early or tragic death, a sinful life, or just confusion and fear that made the soul lose the correct path after death) such souls are not reborn but have to stay on earth in the form of a ghost or demon. "These are souls which are lost, or didn't realise that this life was over... they are scared and scaring" (FM 2010: G. M., 1979, Khalka).

The frightening power of the *chötgör* is in its uncertainty, which makes this character flexible and universal and gives it the ability to successfully adapt and survive in a variety of rural and urban conditions and contexts.¹¹

In comparison with other characters, the *chötgör* does not have any fixed location. It might possess abandoned houses and places, might be seen on roads and in the steppe, might come to somebody's home (as in the text above), or settle in different objects (cloth, furniture, clocks, books, etc.). The *chötgör* is the only demon that has successfully moved to cities; it feels comfortable both in rural and urban conditions. It also does not have any special fixed appearance (as, for example, demonic females do). A *chötgör* might be invisible and act as a poltergeist, or be partially visible (eyes, hands, legs, etc.), have an uncertain shape (something black, shades, something fuzzy in a shape of human figures), or have the fixed form of an animal or human. One of its popular images in the steppe is the demonic lights people can see at twilight and during the night. These lights do not let you come closer, but follow night travellers sometimes calling them by name. The most important thing in such a situation is not to get scared:

If you do not scare them then everything will be all right, the light will not harm you, it will just follow you for a while and then go away, you will be okay. But if you get scared then you will get sick and bad things might happen. (FM 2012: A. H., 1961, Khalkha)

These demonic lights are sometimes associated with the bones of deceased people: "big lights are from skulls and smaller ones from pelvic bones" (FM 2009: N. M., 1945, Khalkha).¹² Sometimes they are associated with the souls of Russian soldiers who passed away on Mongolian soil¹³ and continue to drive around on invisible demonic cars with bright lights.

Once I went with my wife to her relatives and were coming back late in the evening. Suddenly in the middle of the road we saw that bad light. My wife first saw it, I did not believe her, but then I also saw the strange light. It was coming to us from the right side. It looks like a car headlight, people say, sometimes even the noise of a car might be heard, but no car is visible. I tried to drive faster, but it kept chasing us. Once it came very close, my wife scared, jumped on the seat of the motorbike behind me and occasionally touched that light. The light finally went away, but both of us were scared for a long time after this. My wife got sick and her

leg started to hurt, so as she cannot walk on it for a month. I think it was souls of Russian soldiers who died there. (FM 2016: A. L., 1980, Buryat)

Together with the diversity of appearance *chötgör* have a wide repertoire of actions, expressing their presence and communicating with people. A *chötgör* might just live its ordinary life scaring accidental witnesses, as with *chötgörs* from one of the collected narratives living in an abandoned tourist camp, or interact actively with human beings, as with demonic hitchhikers, ghosts occupying the houses of the living, and many other examples. The *chötgör* elicits unspecified, universal fear among people, regardless of gender, age or status.

It should be mentioned that *chötgör*, in comparison with other characters, might be very informative and 'historical' beings, reflecting images of former and recent events, presences and process concerning individual and collective life. They can embody personal features (dead relatives and friends) and ethnic stereotypes. Thus, for example, the *chötgörs* living in the Gimpel-Guai's tent in the text above, written in the 1960s, were supposed to be the souls of Chinese Kuomintang soldiers from the beginning of the 20th century, while in contemporary narratives they have already been replaced by more recent 'memories', among them the ghosts of Japanese soldiers from the Battles of Khalkhyn Gol (1939), the ghosts of Russian soldiers or the ghosts of persecuted lamas. Urban spaces are similarly occupied by Chinese merchants from former times, contemporary Chinese and Japanese girl-ghosts suffering tragic love, students from dormitories, and so on.

THE FEAR OF FEAR

As the variety of expressions of *chötgör* increases so too does the variety of consequences someone can face after an unexpected encounter. According to belief, such an encounter might be regarded at the same time as showing the person was already experiencing a bad state, or as a bad omen for the future.¹⁴ The consequences might include different kinds of bad luck and misfortune, problems with health and even death, but the most significant is fear...

During my interviews many informants gave their own understandings and interpretations of the malevolent influence of an encounter with a *chötgör*. Different individual remarks on this topic allow us to construct a common framework for the notion. According to my fieldwork data *chötgör* has *hii üsegdel* ('empty appearance') and might influence people in different ways, acting physically or mentally, through the nervous system, or by negative energy, etc. But the most dangerous and harmful for the person is fear because through this fear negative effects can stick to the person. This fear can also lead to the fear of fear – the fear of being scared of meeting the *chötgör* and of being harmed because of this meeting. Thus, fear is the most powerful tool in having a bad influence on a person and in leading him or her to a misfortunate life or tragic death: it is fear that, actually, makes the *chötgör* real.

If someone thinks that *chötgör* don't exist and is not scared of them then they don't exist and will not be able to do harm, but if someone thinks that they exist, then they do, and something bad will surely happen (FM 2017: D. B., 1948, Khalkha).

“The *chötgör* has an empty appearance, it cannot do something physically, to hurt us or something, it acts through our nervous system; when we are scared we are weak and it harms us” (FM 2010: L. D., 1953, Khalkha). “The *chötgör* are not real, they frighten us, influence our psyches, our minds, they use it and play tricks” (FM 2014: A. N., 1967, Khalkha). “*Chötgör* are not dangerous, they are like an illusion... Fear is dangerous. When person scared s/he loses strength and good luck, gets sick and may even die.” (FM 2014: G. B., 1958, Khalkha) “The most important thing is to stay calm. Even if you meet something strange, everything will be all right if you are not scared. Most harmful for a person is his/her own fear.” (FM 2015: T. E., 1968, Khalkha)

This popular explanatory model of suffering harm from fear might be regarded as an understanding influenced by different concepts, popular scientific views, former atheistic ideas, Tibetan–Mongolian Buddhism and Mongolian shamanic traditions. This understanding is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and ritual practices concerning the soul. According to the well-known old belief, still extant today, sometimes the soul can leave the body, in which case the person changes, gets slow, gets ill and could soon die. Usually this happens because of fear – when someone is accidentally scared of something, his or her soul leaves the body and stays in the location where this happened. Thus, the soul gets lost or is stolen by evil spirits, and only religious specialists can help by performing special rituals to call the soul back.¹⁵

Thus, fear of fear turns out to be one of the most popular horrors for humans in their everyday lives, and is peculiar in the perceptions of Mongolian folk belief. In this situation, the most effective strategy against fear is to perform lots of professional rituals and lay rites, especially in the home space and before leaving it. At some point this understanding of fear makes humans equal to *chötgör* – people too, as ghosts, are scared and scaring.

FEARS OF THE SUPERNATURAL

The scariest thing for people turns out to be the mental state and emotional experience of fear; in contrast below I discuss some examples of beliefs about what is supposed to be frightening for supernatural beings. Beliefs about what is frightening for the frightening – ghosts, demons and everything bad – are sprinkled in narratives and ritual practices.

Some popular frightening images of malevolent spirits and demonic creatures are holy characters, supreme gods and deities, such as Qormusata Khan/Tengri,¹⁶ Burkhan Bagsh (Buddha), Khan Garuda,¹⁷ Otshirvani,¹⁸ Tara Ehe¹⁹ and other bodhisattvas, etc. Holy characters are usually presented in narratives as the last resort for humans to approach to get rid of troublesome demons. The names and visual images of holy characters are widely involved in rituals and rites that are supposed to offer protection from malevolent spirits, demons and all that is bad in order to block their way and scare them off. The significant detail is that in such situations these demons can be scared not only by holy names and images (as in Christian traditions, for example) but also by the massacres that holy characters usually perform on demonic creatures. The common finale of the stories is the physical destruction of the demonic creature – “then Ochirvani smashed the demon with his heavy fist” (FM 2009: N. B., 1943, Khalkha). Rituals and

rites usually also include a verbal description of what is expected of the demons if they do not go away:

Khan Garuda is coming here,
Khan Garuda will tear your flesh with its claws,
Khan Garuda will smash your bones with its beak,
It will cut you into pieces and throw them around.²⁰ (FM 2016: G. M., 1980, Khalkha)

The holy objects, attributes of deities and tools of religious specialists (lamas and shamans) are quite menacing both in Buddhist and Shamanic rituals (images of swords, axes, bows and arrows, etc.) where they are used as weapons to demolish demons and all evil.

Mongolian contains the term *darah* for this demolition of demons and spirits, which might be translated as 'suppressing' or 'crushing'.²¹ In Mongolian tradition religious specialists and traditional wrestlers²² have the ability and skill to suppress demons, as do supreme gods and deities. According to the collected examples this suppression has both a metaphorical and physical character. After neutralising the negative abilities of demonic creatures, shamans and wrestlers usually press them under rocks,²³ while lamas put them in bottles and bury them in the ground. In the narrative below, performed by a shaman, religious specialists united to calm down and suppress local spirits which turned out to be totally evil to the local community:

Lamas and shamans caught the nine huge demons [*tiiren*].²⁴ They were evil nature spirits. Apart from them there was one more demon, the tenth one, he was the head of others. Lamas and shamans caught him also. They put him between two cast iron boilers and buried him in the earth pressed down with a huge stone. He is still there, buried under the earth, in the district called Rinchinlkhumbé, under that stone. The other nine demons were separated from their leader, buried and pressed by nine black stones on the bank of the river Tengesiin-gol, which is north of lake Tsgaan-nur. They are very big stones the size of a yurt. (FM 2007: M. R., 1958, Darkhad)

The ordinary people, who do not have terrifying weapons or supernatural abilities with which to scare away bad spirits and demons, have to use words and improvised means such as profane objects such as might be found in any Mongolian house. Words might be regarded as an effective and multifunctional tool that scare demons and spirits away by referring to the deities and their weapons, or by hobbling demons and ghosts, "tying their clawed paws and closing fanged jaws" (FM 2016: H. A., 1952, Khalkha). Other words could disable and mislead demonic creatures sending them into delusion. One of the most popular narratives is connected to the god Tara Eha. If a mother carrying a baby places an ash mark on the baby's forehead and reads the prayer to Tara Eha, *chöt-gör* see the deity carrying a leveret rather than the mother and baby.

Among popular objects that are supposed to scare away demons and spirits are objects usually used to tie things, for example male belts²⁵ or the nooses of whip handles. It is believed that spirits and demons are scared to be caught and hobbled by these things. These objects are usually used when passing places with bad, demonic reputations, or once an encounter with a ghost has already begun:

Thus, that thing attacked the man, and they started to struggle, a long long struggled, no one could win. Finally, Dorj felt that his strength was leaving him, a little bit more and he would lose... Then, somehow he managed to take off his belt and wrap it around his hand. All of a sudden everything stopped... He was alone, lying there half alive on the ground, no one around, that creature disappeared. The Lama said to him after the accident that he was very lucky to survive, if he hadn't taken off his belt the demon would definitely have killed him. *Chötgör* are scared of male belts. (FM 2016: G. D., 1982, Khalkha)

Another anti-demonic thing, and probably the most popular object that protects the home space from everything bad, is believed to be sharp objects, such as a saw, hedgehog spines, fish teeth, thorny plants or other sharp things. People usually put these objects above the door to prevent entrance by malevolent agents. In the narrative below, spirits themselves admit this fear.

One Buryat man could see and talk with spirits and demons. Once he met tree ghosts and joined their company. These ghosts thought that he was also dead. They came to a rich household. One of them took a place near to the door, another one near the window in the ceiling,²⁶ the third one came in and made the ill son of the house owner sneeze. When the boy sneezed, his soul came out and, being scared and crying, tried to escape from the house, but the ghost who was standing near the door caught it and the three of them went away. The man also followed them. On their way the man asked the spirits, "what you are scared of most of all?" The ghosts said that most of all they were scared of rosehip and hawthorn and asked, "and what were you scared of most of all when you were alive?" The man said, "most of all in my life I was scared of fat meat!" Thus, they continued on their way, and in a while the man said: "Let me carry that soul, you are tired already". The spirits gave him the soul. When the man saw bushes of rosehip and hawthorn, he jumped there together with the soul. The ghosts could not even come close to the bushes and did not know how to get the man and the soul. Then they found somewhere fat meat and started to throw it into bushes, the man was shouting "Oh, I am so scared, so scared!" all the while eating the meat. The ghosts realised their failure and went away, and that man came out of the bushes and took the soul back to the sick boy. (Khangalov 1959: 396)

According to collected data, spirits and demons might also be sensitive to smells. In one of the narratives a demoness leaving the house ordered to her human husband to burn human excrement when she came back, but instead he started to burn cade (a standard offering for deities). Because of this his demonic wife could not come back and was killed by Otshirvani (FM 2010: A. T. 1947, Khalka). In contrast, in some cases urinating is regarded as a very effective traditional method to disarm demons and neutralise their negative influence. Finally, some demons (such as the demoness *mam*, in the narrative below) might simply be shut down by a skilful hunter.

CONCLUSION

The supernatural and fear connected with it has a flexible nature and a great variety of faces. Attempts to overcome it only creates a new productive environment for the supernatural to transform and develop, involving new images, meanings and contexts.

Regarding the collected data concerning contemporary Mongolian traditions, we might conclude that fear of the supernatural has various types (demonic fear, respectful fear, fear of an uncertain malevolent influence), reflecting different relations established between humans and supernatural agents (monsters, demons, nature spirits, ghosts, etc.), who have different functions and 'missions' in folk culture (to terrify, to regulate relations with nature, to refer to collective messages and memories, etc.).

Each kind of human fear has a specific character and value. For example, demonic fear, at least in its adult forms, because it is regarded as a true experience, is still usually embodied in such genres as anecdotes, remarkable stories, etc. Even if encounter, for example, with a demonic woman can be performed as a memorate, it retains features of joy and humour. It is important to admit that this kind of fear basically represents the fear of a physical influence (being eaten, kidnapped, married by force or being covered with hairs). An opposite example might be found in narratives about encounters with nature spirits or ghosts. These stories occupy more serious and alarming genres and situations, such as consulting with religious specialists, reflecting or even reconsidering one's current life situation, either personal or collective. These kinds of belief and narratives represent 'more frightening' fears of uncertainty and an unphysical influence (named by different terms – energy, mentality, nervous system, etc.), which are much wider and stronger, and able to involve every realm of life (wealth, health, relationships, etc.).

Not only do images of fear, but also folk perceptions of fear seem highly meaningful and informative. In Mongolian culture these perceptions have been shaped under the influence of a diversity of traditions – ethnic, regional, religious, historical, etc. One of the central concepts popular in contemporary folklore is the fear of the fear – a productive explanatory model of the that which is frightening and its malevolent influence.

Talk about supernatural fear would not be relevant or fair without including its opposite, fears of supernatural creatures. When the best method of defence is attack, frightening becomes an important part of everyday communication between humans and supernatural agents. Narratives and rituals contain folk ideas about methods of scaring off demons, spirits and ghosts. Among these objects of fear are holy figures (supreme gods and deities), skilful religious specialists (lamas, shamans, wrestlers), holy objects (attributes of deities and specialists), magical words appealing to the supreme figures and spells, ordinary objects (binding and stabbing), etc. Remarkably, all these objects of fear for supernatural creatures are connected to the idea of physical influence, i.e. suppressing or destroying these creatures. Thus, while physical mankind is most scared of mental violence, bodiless supernatural creatures are most scared of physical violence and injury.

NOTES

1 A few works were devoted to Mongolian fear from the perspective of Buddhist tradition (Kos'min 2012), and general natural and psychological perspectives (Oberfalzerova 2012). In these works, images of fear as it relates to supernatural belief are regarded as reflections of transmitted religious concepts or as images of basic human fears connected with the dangers of nature. In this article I analyse images of supernatural fear from the perspectives of folklore studies, using the concepts of supernatural belief and vernacular religion.

2 Among works that discuss the survival potential and pragmatics of narratives about the supernatural see, for example, Honko 1964; Bennett 1999; Avery 2008; Valk 2015.

3 The word for a rural space.

4 A ritual construction of stones and branches devoted to nature spirits, their 'residences'.

5 These pedagogical functions of supernatural characters are a common international phenomenon, discussed in various works (Widdowson 1977; Bronner 2019).

6 A demon which, according to some beliefs, flies in the air spreading madness among people (Khangelov 1959).

7 Malevolence influence of *lus*, nature spirits.

8 This especially concerns snakes, fishes, forest animals with unusual features (one horn, remarkable colour, etc.).

9 Interesting that the same taboo traditionally applied to children, who could not name their parents and between husband and wife (see Gruntov et al. 2016: 42).

10 Damdinsuren is a very famous and remarkable Mongolian scholar. He was the first to, among other topics, collect and research narratives about the supernatural at the time when even to talk about this topic was forbidden. Stories collected by him represent valuable materials that give the opportunity to make comparative studies of Mongolian demonology and everyday beliefs.

11 For more on this character in contemporary rural space, see Solovyova 2017.

12 Traditional Mongolian funerals, 'leaving in the steppe', in which the body is left in the steppe or on the side of a mountain for animals and birds to remove the remains. On the peculiar semantics of bones in Mongolian folk culture, see Birtalan 2002; Solovyova 2010.

13 During the socialist period Soviet military groups were situated in different parts of Mongolia together with the Mongolian military. Another popular possibility, according to Mongolian (and some Asian traditions, including Chinese) beliefs is that the soul stays on Earth and becomes a ghost *chötgör* and dies in a foreign land.

14 According to some beliefs ghosts are visible to those in a liminal state, for example those who are sick or near to death.

15 These ritual practices are very popular both in Buddhist (Lessing 1951: 75) and Shamanic (Khangelov 1959: 121) traditions in former and modern times.

16 A supreme god (the head of the 99 skies, *tengri*) of Mongolian mythology, according to some opinions from the Iranian tradition through Zoroastrianism (Neklyudov 2010: 349).

17 Very popular deity in Chinese and Tibetan–Mongolian Buddhism, legendary bird or bird-like creature in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain mythology.

18 One of the wrathful deities, protectors of Dharma.

19 In Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism, this deity is regarded as the female counterpart of Avalokiteshvara. According to a popular myth, Tara comes from the tears of Avalokiteshvara.

20 A passage from a spell against childrens' skin diseases.

21 The motif of the 'bodily' crushing of demons and spirits is connected to ritual practices, popular in the Tibeto-Mongolian cultural-religious field, some of whom are rooted in ancient Indian traditions (Dalton 2011).

22 Traditional wrestlers in Mongolian folklore are regarded as epic heroes of the present era. One of the popular motifs connected with them is the struggle with *chötgör*.

23 This detail, of pressing the enemy with a rock, is typical of epic texts and probably came from the epic tradition.

24 The name of another type of demon popular in Mongolian folklore.

25 In Mongolian culture, such objects of male clothing as a hat and belts have very rich semantics and important roles as symbols of male power and authority. In Mongolian the word for a young woman or girl is *busgüü* (lit. 'without a belt'), reflected in various contexts, including rituals and rites, mentioned in the first Mongolian chronicle *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Cleaves 1981).

26 *Tonoо*, the hole for the chimney in a yurt.

SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials from 2006–2017. Materials are kept in the author's personal collection and made partly available at <https://ruthenia.ru/folklore/mongexp.htm>. The following metadata is provided: the interviewees' initials and year of birth, and the name of the Mongolian tribe to which the interviewee belongs.

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