

A NOTE ON THE KALMYK *TSAGAN AAV*, THE 'WHITE GRANDFATHER': RITUAL AND ICONOGRAPHY

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Most of the Kalmyks in Russia are Buddhists, but like all of the Mongolian-origin peoples they also have many religious practices that have a non-Buddhist source. The most important of these for Kalmyks is veneration of the deity known as *Tsagan Aav* ('White Grandfather').¹ This god, who is called *Tsagaan Övgön / Ebügen* among the Khalkha Mongols and *Sagaan Ebügen* among the Buryats (in both cases meaning 'White Old Man'), is widely known across Inner Asia. He is said to be an all-encompassing Master of Land and to bring prosperity, fertility, protection from misfortune, and long life to people and animals. In the mid-18th century, the White Old Man was incorporated into the Buddhist liturgical canon by the influential and innovative Inner Mongolian lama Mergen Gegen Lubsandambijaltsan as a protector deity,² and from that time onwards (if not before) he was accorded a role as a beneficent minor figure in the Buddhist cosmology. However, the importance of this deity in everyday life, as well as his attributes and associated iconography, varied from place to place and from time to time. White Grandfather has come to have particular - and indeed central - significance for the Kalmyks, and he is one of the most distinctive elements of their traditional culture. He is mentioned in many of the interviews for the Kalmyk Cultural Heritage Documentation project, and therefore we provide this essay as further background for the documentation.

Such is the scale and multiplicity of powers of this deity for Kalmyks that *Tsagan Aav* divides into several aspects that are often represented differently iconographically (see Section 4). Kalmyks worship him in three main forms: as *Gazr-usna Tsagan Aav/avh*, **Master of Lands and Waters** and protector of animals, especially antelopes (*saigak*); as *Delken Tsagan Aav/avh*, **Master of the Universe / Whole Earth**, including mountains and ancient burial sites; and as *Zhilin Ezen*, the protector of the whole Kalmyk people and as the mobile **Master of Time / the Years**, who makes his nomadic move at the winter solstice and confers extra years of life to people (Bakaeva ///: 46). With these varied powers, the White Old Man is a far more comprehensive deity for the Kalmyks than for the most other Mongol-origin peoples, most of whom emphasize only the first of these roles.

This essay is intended as an addition to the information given in the video interviews. It derives from several sources: published studies, mainly by Kalmyk specialists; reports and other materials posted on Kalmyk, Buryat and Mongol websites; private collections of images; and ethnographic details supplied by respondents working for the project, Dr. Baasanjav Terbish and Dr. Elvira Churyumova. However, this cannot be a complete study of such a complex topic, and much further information is available (see references). Focusing on ritual and iconography, it will have five sections:

¹ Written form: Цаган аав; also known as Цаган авһ ('White uncle'); авһ refers to any senior male relative in the paternal line, Bakaeva 2011; ///: 46)

² See Bakaeva 2011; Nemanova 2009.

1. core features of the veneration of White Father common to the Oirat peoples, including the Kalmyks of Russia
2. rituals traditionally addressed to the deity by the Kalmyks
3. texts and legends associated with Tsagan Aav
4. iconography of paintings and sculptures
5. indication, with references for further reading, about the contemporary transformations in religious activities associated with Tsagan Aav

1. Features of the cult of White Father common to the Oirat peoples

The fact that White Father is worshipped as the main deity among the Oirat peoples of Western Mongolia is important for understanding the role of this figure in the religious cosmology of the Kalmyks (Хальмгуд). The Russian Kalmyks consist of several 'tribes' or sub-ethnic groups, which broke away from the main body of Oirats in 1607 and migrated westwards, eventually reaching their present lands on the steppes on the western shores of the Caspian Sea. Before that, the 'Four Oirat', a confederation of the four major Oirat groups, the Khoshut, Torghut, Choros and Dörbet, had formed a powerful oppositional weight to the central Khalkha Mongols. It was the westernmost of these, the Torghuts, which led the exodus. Almost all present-day Kalmyks of Russia derive from these four groups, and they remain aware of their Oirat tribal/sub-ethnic identities, while also subscribing to the national Kalmyk identity and the supra-national Russian one. Because the Kalmyks living at great distance inside Russia had a separate historical development from the Oirats remaining in Mongolia and Xinjiang, there was little mutual contact over the centuries. Thus, the elevation of Tsagan Aav as a supreme deity by *all* Oirat-origin groups (but not by other Mongols) suggests that this form of the cult is very old, dating at the very least from before the departure of the Torghuts to the Caspian steppes.³

We can also surmise that the elevated cosmological role of Tsagan Aav and his identification as a 'Buddhist deity' was related to the somewhat idiosyncratic, folk-oriented strand of Buddhism with which the cult was initially connected. This tradition originated with an Oirat prince, who gave up his life as a nobleman to become a lama, wandering ascetic and missionary called the Neiji Toin (1557-1653). He propagated a 'Buddhism of the people', including magical feats and teaching sacred Tantric formulas (mantras) to lay persons, and, unlike the central Buddhist hierarchy, he insisted on teaching in his native Mongolian, not Tibetan. He was active first in converting Oirats from shamanism to Buddhism, and later he undertook the same task among Eastern Mongols in present-day Inner Mongolia. Mergen Gegen, the Reincarnate Lama mentioned above who included White Old Man and other folk rituals in his official liturgy, took his religious inspiration directly from the relatively inclusive and heterodox Neiji Toin line (Bakaeva 2008: 164; 177-8; Humphrey and Ujeed, 2013: 81-97).

For contemporary Dörbet [Dörvöd] Mongols of west Mongolia Tsagan Aav is as powerful as the divine Sky (*Tenger*) venerated by the Khalkha (Halh)

³ For discussion see Badma Bembin 'Kalmytskie obychai'.
<https://ok.ru/group/52425173303350/topic/67350266658870>

Mongols. He is seen as a transcendent father, who is the ancestor, guarantor and judge, of the descent groups, who legitimizes their existence and imposes sanctions against transgression of their ethics and rules of perpetuation. At the same time, he is the master (*ezen*) of *all* lands and wild animals, as well as the particular lands dominated by sacred mountains venerated by each group. He must be 'pleased' by offerings and by observing his rules about right conduct (in human relations, herding, hunting, treatment of nature, etc.), in which case he confers fortune, prosperity, and luck. The main offerings to Tsagan Aav are made at mountain top shrines (*oboo*, *ovoo*) in early summer, when the men of each district pray for mercy, protection and fertility. Women do not take part in this veneration, as the descent groups are reckoned in the patrilineal line only (Charlier 2015: 45, 66-70, 156).

The other important occasion for the worship of Tsagan Aav by the Dörbet and other Oirat groups is the Lunar New Year (*Tsagan Sar*, the first spring month of the annual cycle of seasons according to the phases of the moon). On this day, Tsagan Aav gives each male an extra year of life.⁴ Families or small kin groups build a small *oboo* (also called *inder*, 'pedestal') of stones or snow on a high spot near their winter dwellings. Led by an elder, they make a fire on or beside the altar, and burn meat and bones on it as an offering to the mountain spirits. This rite is called *deer mörgöh*, worship of the all-highest (Zhukovskaya 2002: 65). On this day, Urianghai people say that Tsastan Tsagan Aav ('Snowy White Father') descends from the Altai Mountains, visits each family, and sees and judges each person. Coloured ribbons are attached to sticks inserted into the *oboo*, often designating the colour that distinguishes the clan segment (*ovog-elken*) in question from other clans, and thus serving as lineage territory markers (for details, see Bakaeva ///: 50-57).⁵

2. Rites for Tsagan Aav among Kalmyks

Among contemporary Kalmyks the traditional worship of Tsagan Aav also takes place on two main calendrical occasions: in the early summer (*Urs sar*)⁶ at *ovoo* sites, and in people's homes at the 'New Year'. However, with their separate historical development, the Kalmyk rites have come to diverge in some ways from the Mongolian Oirat ones, especially as regards their timing.⁷ Until the 20th century when the Soviet and the Tibetan Buddhist calendars were introduced, the Kalmyk calendar was set according to a pre- or non-Buddhist cycle according to which it began at the Winter Solstice, not the Lunar New Year (*Tsagan Sar*) observed by the Mongols and Tibetans, which usually falls around February. It was at the Winter Solstice festival, which was called Zhilin Ezn ('Master of Year(s)'), that Kalmyks worshipped Tsagan Aav in his Delken

⁴ Among Kalmyks this 'additional year' refers both to a successful year immediately to come and to an extra year added to a person's destined lifespan, Elvira Churyumova, personal communication).

⁵ *Yas(an)* – 'bone' – is the word used to refer to patrilineal kinship, as distinct from 'blood' for kinship through women (Bakaeva ///: 59).

⁶ *Urs* – plural, from Mong. 'ür / ür-e', descendant, seed, progeny; *sar* – month.

⁷ For details on the Kalmyk lunar calendar and its divergence from the Mongolian one, see Bakaeva (1994).

(‘universal’) form. At this time, he was believed to migrate and to descend to earth and add one year to each male worshipper (Bakaeva ///: 61-2). People say Tsagan Aav is a ‘nomadising god’ (*huudg burhan*), who returns along his routes at the New Moon and the Half-Moon of each month.⁸ On his visits to earth, Tsagan Aav sees and judges all people, rewarding or punishing their goods and bad actions. These calendrical rites were interrupted for decades, like all public religious activity, during the Soviet anti-religious campaigns and the exile of the Kalmyks to Siberia and Central Asia. When they were revived in the 1980s-90s, the Zhilin Ezn ceremony was gradually absorbed into the Buddhist Zul (‘lamp’) festival⁹ held in mid-December.¹⁰

The offering rites made to Tsagan Aav consequently also changed. Sacrificial meat/bone offerings on a fire were originally made in the last month of autumn, a date which probably referred to an even more ancient ‘autumnal’ conception of the New Year, since it is well known that an order by the Emperor Khubilai changed the date of the New Year from autumn to the beginning of spring in the Mongol Empire. This animal sacrifice-type of rite has not been carried forward into the Buddhist Zul festival. However, the other occasion for the fire-offering ritual with meat (at Urs Sar) continues to the present day at the *ova* rites described below.¹¹ Here the meat sacrifice is traditionally associated with the reproduction of the patrilineage and women are in principle precluded from attending (though in practice some women, such as tourists, do sometimes make an appearance).

Over the past twenty years, Tsagan Avv has become ever more popular in Kalmykia, and statues of him have been erected by practically every village and many Buddhist temples. Often the statues are placed on mountaintops, near a sacred cairn or shrine called *ova (oboo)*. An example is the mountain called Bogd Uula (‘sacred mountain’, named after the famous mountain at Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia), which looms over the flat plains at Lake Baskunchak in Astrakhan Oblast (this was a region of Kalmyk habitation before the exile and reduction in size of the Kalmyk Republic).

⁸ <http://asiarussia.ru/articles/11147/>

⁹ The butter lamp festival (Zul) was created in the 15th century by the great Buddhist reformer Tsongkhapa in honour of Sakyamuni Buddha’s victory over other religions.

¹⁰ For details on the rites and the adding of one year of life at this festival, see: <http://www.kalmykiatour.com/prazdniki/kalmyckij-novyj-god-zul/>

¹¹ However, Sanj Altan describes a non-sacrificial rite carried out at Ürüs in late May by the Kalmyk migrants to the USA. The oldest men, seated around a large *thanka* of the White Old Man, read the text of the sutra for Tasgan Aav and performed libations using tree branches with the leaves dipped in milk, invoking the names of mountains and rivers of their homeland and intoning in loud voices, ‘Tsug Tsug’ (Altan 2007: 13).



Bogd Ula mountain in Astrakhan Oblast.

Local people say that Tsagan Aav lives on top of this mountain. The legend is that when the Kalmyks were migrating from Dzhungaria in the 17th century, they carried this mountain with them on their backs, aiming for the mild climate and well-watered steppes near the Volga. However, they did not manage to carry the mountain the whole way. One of the men in the caravan had a sinful thought, which angered their heavy mountain burden: it punished him by falling on him at this spot.¹² Some legends about this mountain are provided in the interviews with Badma Narbaev and Khargchin Kholzhieva for the Project; a video entitled 'Pilgrimage to Bogdo Uul, 2017' showing the ritual and prayers along with the statue of a seated Tsagan Aav, is also uploaded to the Project website.¹³ The *ova* rituals are mostly conducted on the 16th of the Urs Sar (the first summer month), the date on which it is said that Tsagan Aav, Master of Lands and Waters, comes down to inspect his livestock – herds of deer (Bakaeva 2011).

At village and local monastery sites, Tsagan Aav is venerated chiefly on two occasions, at the Zul and Urs Sar festive dates. Zul is associated with the Delkyan ('universal') form of the deity, and Urs Sar with the Land Master form (Bakaeva 2011). In both cases, people lay offerings of white food (dairy products), flowers, and money (white and red coins) before the statues or paintings (*thankas*), and they also light small oil lamps and tie 'wind horse' (*kii mori*) flags to the image. In one village, a recent statue of Delkyan Tsagan Aav includes a child emerging from the hem of his gown, indicating the significance of the deity for promoting reproduction.

¹² <https://varandej.livejournal.com/663567.html>

¹³ <http://www.kalmykheritage.socanth.cam.ac.uk/en/kalmyksinrussia.php?classif=85>



Tsagan Aav statue, in a Kalmyk village.

Tsagan Aav is also widely worshipped by individual families in their homes. Many Kalmyks have domestic altars on which images of Buddhist deities are displayed, along with lamps and offerings. Often Tsagan Aav is placed centrally in these displays, even though this is doctrinally incorrect, as Tsagan Aav is not an enlightened deity according to orthodox teachings.

In this last point, it is relevant to record a note on the founding of the main Buddhist temple, Burkhan Bagshin Altan Sume (Golden Temple of the Buddha Sakyamuni) in Elista, since it illustrated the current relation between the official Buddhist hierarchy and veneration of Tsagan Aav. The idea of founding a temple in the capital city first came from the President of Kalmykia, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. In the early 2000s he had met the Dalai Lama, who warmly approved the President's plan for a Buddhist temple. But Ilyumzhinov, advised by a local healer (*medlegchi*)¹⁴ who claimed to be a daughter of Tsagan Aav, switched to the idea of dedicating the temple to Tsagan Aav, who had become newly popular since the 1990s. When the President explained his new plan to the lamas, many of whom had come from Tibet, they were in shock. In Tibet, the White Old Man has a lowly, even somewhat comic status.¹⁵ In the end the lamas

¹⁴ *Medlegchi* is the Kalmyk term for folk practitioners who eclectically combine healing, magical practices, divination, psychological advice and 'new world' self-improvement practices, see Terbish (in press).

¹⁵ In Tibet, White Old Man (*rgan po dkar po*) is regarded as a peripheral folk deity of ancient non-Buddhist origin, associated with clans, worshipped among many peoples across Asia. The figure was introduced into the Tibetan Buddhist Cham (sacred dance drama) by the 13th Dalai Lama, who had a dream about this during his exile in Mongolia at the beginning of the 20th century. In the Tibetan Cham, dressed in white with snuff bottle, White Old Man is a character in the Tiger

were able to convince Ilyumzhinov to change his mind and make this a proper Buddhist temple and monastery. Tsagaan Aav was to be allowed a place on the site only *outside* the temple boundary (a large statue now stands at the foot of the steps leading to the main entrance). For further information about the founding and architecture of the temple, see the interview in English with Telo Tulku Rinpoche about the founding of this important city religious complex.¹⁶



Tsagan Aav statue outside the central temple in Elista, 2017.

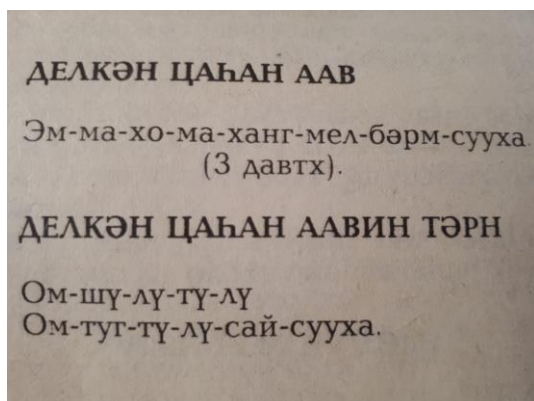
Some temples and prayer-houses in Kalmykia specialize in worship of Tsagan Aav, such as the Khoshut Khurul, where worshippers attend to pray for the prosperity of their clan kinship group. Pilgrimages are organized from Elista to visit these places.¹⁷ The Delkyan ('universal') form of Tsagan Aav is venerated at a dedicated prayer house in Astrakhan Oblast. Here people pronounce a special mantra for the deity,¹⁸ which is posted on the wall of the house (see illustration below).

Dance, which symbolizes the transition to a new year from the old. After symbolically killing the tiger, the Old Man's strength is renewed. In some versions of the dance, he then proceeds to pass among the audience asking for donations, sometimes offering a peck of snuff from his bottle; he is no longer limited to his original role of venerable old man, but begins to drink alcohol and play the fool, continuing to dance until he is too drunk and begins to fall over (Kohn 2001; Hummel 1997: 60). The Cham (Tsam) dance is held from time to time in Kalmykia, but it seems that Tsagan Aav plays no large part in it.

¹⁶ <http://www.kalmykheritage.socanth.cam.ac.uk/en/kalmyksinrussia.php?classif=82>

¹⁷ <http://www.kalmykiatour.com/2013/obryady-v-hosheutovskom-hurule/#more-4176>

¹⁸ It seems that there is more than one mantra for Tsagan Aav. A different one, called the 'root mantra' is posted on the website *Vkontakte*, to be pronounced on the 'Tsagan Aav's days', the 2nd and 16th days of each lunar month: *ОМ НАМО САЛУ ТОМА ДОКА ТОЛО ТОНОМ ТОЛО ТОЛО ДИЙЯ СУУХА ХА ХА ХА*. Yet another mantra for the deity is provided in the sutra used by Kalmyks in the USA: *o shülü shülü tüq tülü saya suxa*, which, when said seven times, will ease the pain of disease (Altan 2007: 20); see also Muzraeva :92).



3. Prayer texts for the White Old Man.

Due to the popularity of the White Old Man / White Grandfather, texts related to his veneration were numerous and widespread in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and Buryatia. Most were short handwritten texts in the Mongolian script. These spread among the Kalmyks too, before the almost total destruction of religious artifacts in the 1930s, along with the same or similar texts written in the *tod bichig* ('clear script'),¹⁹ the script used by Oirats. The texts (*sudur* – 'sutra') are mixed in genre, including descriptions of the deity, accounts of his powers, admonitions spoken by him, prayers addressed to him, instructions to readers, and mantras evoking his sacred blessing. Often one text may contain several, or all, of these types of communication. The White Old Man texts have attracted much academic attention, especially the 18th century incense-offering text composed by Mergen Gegen and included in his collected works (a similar version was published in Galluu and Jirantai 1986). This latter version (*Tsagan ebügen-ü takilga sang-un sudur*) was analyzed by Heissig (2000), while Futaki (1997) provides a transliteration of it in the Latin alphabet with a translation in Japanese. Mergen Gegen's text is not easily available in English, and as it was this text that inaugurated the White Old Man's acceptance into Buddhist liturgy, I provide an English translation of it as Appendix 1. Futaki (2011) has made a classification of the great variety of texts for White Old Man found in major collections, positing that there are 6 major types and several sub-types.

Mergen Gegen's 18th century text emphasizes that 'you' (White Old Man) received your authority from the Lord Buddha himself, and it calls him 'the father who took vows' (*tangaragtu echige*). This text was probably the prototype for the Kalmyk sutra for White Old Man, which has been published by Muzraeva (2009) with a translation into Russian and, in a slightly different version, by Sanj Altan (2007) with a translation into English.²⁰ The Kalmyk texts develop Mergen

¹⁹ The *tod bichig* alphabet was created by the great Oirat lama scholar Zaya Pandita in 1648. It was a variant of the Mongol script, aiming to distinguish more clearly the sounds in the spoken language and also to make it easier to transliterate from Sanskrit and Tibetan. An example of a Kalmyk text in *tod bichig* addressed to White Old Man was published by Muzraeva (2009).

²⁰ The latter was presumably copied by the Lama owner from some other text after he arrived in the USA in the 1950s (Altan 2007: 13). The text supplied by Muzraeva, which belonged to the Kalmyk mon Nam-mkha Kichikov (1901-86), is therefore the more directly relevant to the Kalmyks of Russia today.

Gegen's brief mention of a meeting into a whole conversation between Buddha and the White Old Man. The Buddha asks why this dignified elder dressed in white is sojourning alone on the mountain called 'Mountain with All Fruits'. The old man replies that with the Heavenly Sky above him and the Earth below the mountain is his dwelling, that he is the Master protector of all creatures, from poisonous snakes and ferocious wild animals to human beings; he is the guard of all 24 directions, the ruler of mountains, lands, waters, steppes and deserts, the protector of humans, their settlements, temples, towns and knowledge (books); he states that he can suppress and calm all of them. He can also overcome demons and evil shamanic spirits (*ongod*) and he can call on the fiery Sky Deities (*tengris*) as his assistants. He adds that he decides on the lifespan, short or long, of the people of this world, and then he explains the moral teachings (respect for parents, refraining from evil thoughts, etc.) he instills in them. Hearing all this, the Buddha exclaims, 'Good, good, O highborn son! Give me your word that you will protect all living beings.' And he then pronounces that all those who read this text will be preserved from illness, and he announces the mantra (*tarni*) for the White Old Man. At this all *tengris* and protector beings rejoice (Muzraeva 2009: 92-3).

Lamas and scribes among the ordinary folk wrote short versions of the prayer for use practical use in rituals addressed to White Old Man. If the sutra described above included description and explanation, the shorter versions were prayers made to the deity. An example from Mongolia (date and place or origin unknown) is provided in Appendix 2. It can be seen that this text, which was copied by hand and circulated among ordinary people, is almost identical to the text composed by Mergen Gegen (Appendix 1).

4. Iconography of *Tsagan Aav*.

The deity has been represented in paintings (*thankas*), stone sculptures, and wooden carvings. E. A. Nemanova in her unpublished *kandidat* dissertation categorized the iconography into five main types (cited in Bakaeva ///: 67):

1. Old man with bald elongated head, sitting in (or in front of) a cave, facing sideways, holding a staff, and surrounded by animals
2. Standing, or alternatively sitting on a throne, facing forwards, against a landscape of mountains and waters
3. Sitting on a throne, with a tiger and a wolf pinned to a cliff and accompanied by pairs of birds (mates)
4. Sitting clothed as an ascetic in a cave under a tree with fruits, with a stream and pairs of birds and wild deer in front, holding a dragon-headed staff in his left hand
5. Riding on a deer, dressed not in white but in red.

Of these, type (4) is the most widespread over the whole Inner Asian region. Type (2) is characteristic of Kalmykia, but rare elsewhere. Type (1) is frequently found in Mongolian regions close to China and is the most similar to Chinese representations of Shou, the god of wisdom and longevity;²¹ meanwhile types (3)

²¹ Shou (Shouxing) is represented standing, but usually bent like an old man; he is bald, with an oversized forehead, has a long beard and moustache, and holds a staff (not with dragon's head) in his left hand and a peach, symbol of longevity, in his right. He is associated with deer, and also

and (5) are rare. However, it should be noted that these ‘types’ are only guides, and many variants exist.

Although the frontal standing representation of Tsagan Aav (no 2 above) is most distinctive of the Kalmyk tradition, they also had the ‘sitting-by-a-cave’ painted images (no 4 above) as well as the seated statues that were so widespread elsewhere. Below, we look briefly at the iconography and symbolism of each of these.

Painting of White Old Man / Tsagan Aav at the cave. This is the classic image corresponding to the ancestral White Grandfather Master of Lands and Waters (*gazr-usna tsagan aav/avga*) who is said to descend on the 2nd and 16th of each month. A pre-Soviet Kalmyk version of this image shows the Tsagan Aav as one of four Buddhist protector deities. He sits facing $\frac{3}{4}$ face to the viewer in a cave, bald or shaven headed, with a large forehead and a long white beard; he wears a red gown with a dark sash, covered with a white cloak, and Mongol-style boots. In his right hand is a Buddhist rosary and in his left hand he holds a thin stick with a small dragon’s head. Pairs of deer and water birds gambol in front of him. A leafy tree with peach-like fruits leans over the scene. In the distance, rising above a mountain, a Buddha appears in the clouds, and a ‘stream’ (of holiness? of rain?) descends from the cloud into one of the pots on a rock beside Tsagan Aav’s feet. Tsagan Aav smiles gently amid this idyllic scene (see Batyreva 1991, fig 21). Some further examples of this type are provided below, ranging from crude prints to sophisticated paintings.



Mongolian print of Sabdag ('land spirit') Namba ('old man') Garbo ('white'). 19th century.

with a specifically Chinese symbolic system (peaches, tortoise, calabash, scroll and cranes) different from that found in Mongolian regions (Hummel 1997: 62). Most images of Shouxing are statuettes, carved of wood or stone. Similar deities are the Japanese Jurojin, derived from Chinese Daoism, god of fortune and longevity, and the very similar Japanese Fukurokuju, another deity of wealth, luck and longevity, who has a tall forehead, dresses in white, bears a staff, and is associated with deer.



Tsagan Ebügen, Mongolia, 19th century.



Tsagan Aav, Kalmyk, 20th-21st century

A number of commentators, notably Nemanova (2009), have argued that this image is highly symbolic. It is not simply a representation of a land spirit-master but has great cosmological significance. Nemanova orients her analysis

by the texts, by general Inner Asian mythology and her own interpretations (more than through specific local informants commenting on how they understand this image). The White Old Man, she holds, represents the Axis of the World and the idea of the cosmic Centre, as do the Tree and the Mountain and the wooden staff.²² All four elements, in their different ways, are symbolic features that link the earth with the divine Sky. The icon is believed to have effect, and can be understood as a maximally simplified version of a ritual. Looking at the image brings spiritual benefit, and the Old Man's gaze at the viewer conveys grace and blessing (ibid.104-6).

The various signs in this image are polysemic, Nemanova argues. The cave, for example, symbolizes the Womb, an idea found across Mongol lands, and as a female principle it opposes the mountain, which denotes maleness and patriarchy. At the same time, the cave signifies Death: it is an 'anti-mountain' that connotes the Underworld to which dead souls go (ibid: 107). Yet the White Old Man sits *in front of* the cave, emerging from it, and thus can be understood to represent the circular process of the death and rebirth of living beings. In this way Tsagan Aav also comes to represent fertility, and not only human reproduction but in nature as a whole. For this reason, the birds and animals in the icon are painted as pairs of mates, a female and a male, and other symbols of fertility such as leafy trees, fruits and running water are always part of the scene (ibid: 109).

In a rare example from Mongolia (early 20th century) the White Old Man is depicted seated, but facing frontally:



Paintings of standing Tsagan Aav.

²² The Old Man's wooden staff (*tayag*) recalls the staffs used ritually by Buryat shamans instead of the drum as instruments whereby they can 'ride' to the skies (Nemanova 2009: 110).



Painting of standing White Old Man. Kalmyk, 19th century

This carefully painted 19th century image corresponds to the idea of Delkyan Tsagan Aav, the Master of Time (*dzhilin ezen*) (Bakaeva 2011), who migrates to visit the world at the winter solstice /Zul. He is pictured standing at full height, directly facing the viewer, against a background of mountains. He holds a dragon-headed staff in his right hand and prayer beads in his left. He is dressed in a blue gown, with a white outer cloak, and he wears slipper-like shoes (not Mongol boots). He has a beard and moustache, and instead of the monk-like shaven head of the seated image he has a full head of grey hair that is tied on top of his head in three strands into a knot. In such paintings of the standing deity he stands in a relatively bare landscape, perhaps reflecting the actual arid surroundings of the Kalmyks. Certain elements of the classic Mongolian Land Master deity's image are less prominent or absent altogether: the tree with fruits, the luxuriant grasses, and the pairs of animals and birds.

This image emphasizes vertical cosmological connection even more strongly than the sitting version. According to the Kalmyk scholar Batyreva the standing figure with its head of plentiful hair stands in for the World Tree, and this substitution is related to the fact that trees are very rare in the bare Caspian steppes. For Kalmyks, lone trees standing in the grasslands have extraordinary significance – they are understood as 'natural verticals' uniting Sky and Earth (Batyreva 2017: 59-60).



Sacred lone tree, Kalmykia.

According to another Kalmyk view, the standing Tsagan Aav symbolizing the World Tree links *three* worlds: the heavenly, the earthly, and the underworld. At the same time, it is 'a phallic symbol of fertility and plenty. The bunch of hair tied on top of his head is a late addition, the three strands representing the Three Treasures of Buddhism (the Buddha, his Teaching, and the Community of Monks). The White Old Man is never pictured wearing any kind of hat. He, as a phallic symbol, could not wear a hat.'²³

Statues of Tsagan Aav. Such statues, mostly recently built, are plentiful in Kalmykia and Western Mongolia, and to a lesser extent in Buryatia and Mongolia. In Oirat lands, such statues may represent Tsagan Aav as the Master of the Altai Mountains, associated with snow-covered peaks, and the deity is given as a *seter* (living sacrifice) a black horse; ribbons are attached to the horse's mane, indicating by the colour (red, brown or yellow) the tribe of the congregation (Batyreva 2017: 61). For a detailed description of the use of coloured ribbons to mark clan identities among the Kalmyk, see Bakaeva ///.

In Buryatia and Mongolia, Tsagan Ebügen is almost always depicted seated.



Statue of Tsagan Ebügen at Sartul-Gegetui Monastery, Buryatia, 2000s.

²³ Personal communication, via Elvira Chyuryumova.

However, in Kalmykia statues of the standing Tsagan Aav are more common:



Tsagan Aav, Elista, 21st century.



Statue of Tsagan Aav, Kalmykia, 2003. Sculptor: P. D. Tazaev.

5. Recent developments in the veneration of Tsagan Aav (1990s-2018)

On the one hand, Tsagan Aav has achieved a national significance in Kalmykia,

with statues erected prominently in the capital city and throughout the country. At the Zul ceremony, the extra year added by the deity is now said to be offered by Tsagan Aav for the whole nation.²⁴

On the other hand, perhaps because Tsagan Aav has been somewhat sidelined by the official Buddhist hierarchy, which is dominated by influences from Tibet, popular ideas have burgeoned in a different direction. In recent years veneration of Tsagan Av and the cosmology associated with him has developed innovative offshoots influenced by popular science and encouraged by the media. New social movements creating receptive audiences for what many would see as 'sci-fi' versions of Tsagan Aav have appeared. Some 'seers' (*medlegchi*) now claim he has divided into many 'cosmic' forms, that he (or these) inhabits astral realms and sends messages to earth from outer space. One leader of such a movement has reversed the traditional identification of the seated image with the Master of Lands and Waters and standing image with the Delkyan ('universal') deity. Instead, it is claimed that the standing Tsagan Aav dwells on earth and is responsible for all beings on it, while the seated version is the ancient Cosmic form (Terbish, in press). Certain adepts now claim to be the child of Tsagan Aav, or to be 'possessed' by his spirit (as in shamanism), or to 'converse' with him and his astral companions – none of which happened in earlier periods. These cults are by no means universally respected in Kalmykia. Some intellectuals dismiss them, and the more 'traditional' beliefs and ritual described above still continue to be widespread, especially in rural areas. Nevertheless, the new cults have been influential, perhaps mainly because they were attractive to Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the former President, who himself claims to have been abducted by aliens. For detailed accounts of these developments, see Humphrey (2014), Gazizova (2016), and Terbish (in press).

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²⁴ <http://www.kalmykiatour.com/prazdniki/kalmyckij-novyj-god-zul/>

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