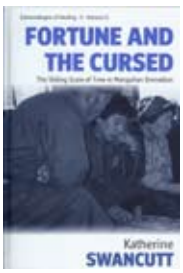
Mongolia



Katherine Swancutt, *Fortune and the Cursed: The Sliding Scale of Time in Mongolian Divination*

New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2012. xx + 263 pages. 22 figures, 5 tables, preface, glossary, bibliography, index. Hardcover, $95.00/£60.00. ISBN 978-0-85745-482-9.

This monograph is the eleventh volume of Berghahn's Epistemology of Healing series in medical anthropology. Swancutt's contribution is an ethnographic study that draws upon sixteen months of fieldwork amongst rural Buryat communities on either side of the Mongol-China border (largely between 1999–2000). The primary ethnographic site was a shamanic household in the Bayandun district of Dornod Province, northeastern Mongolia. A secondary site was amongst laity in the predominantly Buddhist district of Shinekhen Baruun Sum, located in the Evenk Nationality Autonomous Banner of Inner Mongolia, China. Focusing in particular on the depressed economic conditions of Bayandun, this well-mapped study sets about analyzing popular religious practices used to gauge and manipulate the "fortune" (*khiimor'*) of an individual or household. Swancutt joins other anthropologists of Inner Asia in identifying "innovation-making" remedial practices as the dominant form of Buryat religious practice today. More specifically, the author suggests that such practices count as the primary strategy by which household groups identify and respond to crisis. *Fortune and the Cursed* is a carefully considered and intimate portrait of the generative conditions and technical procedures by which a group of marginalized peoples invent culture today in Inner Asia.

The contexts of such invention will be familiar to scholars working on contemporary religious life elsewhere in the region. Both Buryat communities considered here were the victims of severe religious repression during the twentieth century, and without a codified repertoire, today must largely contrive rituals to safeguard fortune. Such improvisation primarily takes shape *via* spirit possession, spirit-human dialogue, and divinatory sessions. In this, Swancutt finds that her informants distinguish innovative remedies conceived of and carried out within secretive, household-specific contexts and broad-based, conventional "repairing rituals" (*zasal*) practiced across Mongol-Buryat cultural regions (between her two ethnographic sites, for instance).

"Innovative remedies" (the author's own term) are used by contemporary Buryats to "organize the apparently 'unknown' or 'disordered' elements of their cosmologies and social settings" (6). As a series of comparative case studies of such innovative responses to crisis, the author takes the reader "to the inside of the curse and the households affected by it, showing how the curse 'victims' initially detected their curse symptoms, how they witnessed the curse castings, how they detected and deflected curses through divinations or shamanic ceremonies and, finally, how they resolved their rivalries with innovative remedies obtained from the spirits" (3).

With an attention to regional difference, Swancutt first introduces the reader to the cast of beings involved in such practices (including typologies of implicated human subjects), surveys conceptions of an after-life bureaucracy whose help is propitiated in these practices, and summarizes the general procedures by which shamans heuristically evoke spirit perspectives (Chapter 2). Adopting insights from Roy Wagner throughout, here the author examines how focal points and contexts are reversed in these rituals, such that participants actively change the timescales of their practice as they pursue innovative remedies that expedite and circumvent what might otherwise be the delayed recovery of falling fortune. Following this, an archaeology of sorts is given for "fortune" and closely related indigenous concepts—such as soul (*süns*), "spirit" (*sür süld*), and karma (*üiliin ür*)—which aggregate into an epistemology of spiraling, cumulative shifts in well-being and order (Chapter 3). (Some readers will have noticed already that Swancutt chooses to adopt a Russian transliteration schema to render Buryat terminology; a reasonable choice, but one that might distract some specialist readers). Chapter 4 examines the nature and timescales of what informants considered two primary causes of falling fortune and soul loss: curses (*kharaal*) and gossip (*khel am*). The former count as witchcraft resulting from intentional, harmful speech acts whose magical, projectile-like weaponry inflicts immediate harm upon victims. The latter produces harm (again, in the form of soul-loss or falling fortune) via the non-intentional accretion of gossip about a victim (interestingly, regardless of the intentionality of such gossip).

Evoking two important concepts from the anthropology of religion, Chapter 5 uses Buryat divination to show that "a combination of intersubjective relations and perspectival encounters often underpins religious or magical activities" (156). This is the basis for Swancutt's contribution to a movement in the study of religion to rehabilitate magic as an analytical category. She argues that "agency-cum-representation" (*à la* Gell [1998] and Taussig [1993]) could reinvigorate the comparative analysis of "magical" intervention dependent upon a theory of distributed personhood (something she glosses as "witchcraft" in this study) (159). Further surveying popular and collaborative practices of divination, Swancutt goes on to show how these managed the "inextensive distance" between shamanic rivals in the rural Buryat districts where she lived (Chapter 5). In a novel pairing of a concept from chaos science and Roy Wagner's notion of cultural innovation, in Chapter 6 Swancutt develops an argument that innovative remedies act as "strange attractors" in household-centric Buryat society. This is so since they unleash irreversible changes to social and cosmological order that eventually settle as the conventional basis for further, equally innovative remedying (as the author discovered upon a return trip

to Bayandun in 2004). Such is the inventive process by which these rural Buryat communities regularly exceeded and defined anew epistemologies of time and space bound up in their central social preoccupation: rising and declining fortune.

While offering a comprehensive investigation of the mechanics of spatio-temporal invention in the context of innovative remedies, in places the Buryat subjects of *Fortune and the Cursed* seem left out of time and space. While we are convincingly shown that innovative remedies repair crisis and impose order by strategically shifting between orders of delayed and expedient time, how do they also strategically historicize? For instance, do they strategically negotiate (or exceed) top-down dictations of time associated with their recent inclusion into state socialism and (in the case of Bayandun) the post-socialist ethnic and national imaginaries? Furthermore, how does the invention of culture affirm or invent alternative (perhaps even subaltern) spatial imaginaries that link these Buryats with a particular Russo-Buryat homeland? In other words, do these ritual innovations affirm or exceed the spatialization of Buryats in the modern administrative strictures of the People's Republics of China or Mongolia? While not explicitly addressed, the dynamism of Swancutt's theoretical approach certainly provides clear avenues by which such questions might be profitably pursued.

A final note must be made on the author's use of divination as a fieldwork method. This was something she was unwittingly drawn into by her hosts, who came to see her as, "an ordinary, non-shamanic black diviner (*khar üzemerch*)" with potential roots (*ug*) to foreign spirits (44). In the early pages of her study, Swancutt reflects upon the ethical unease she felt in providing her informants with divinations, and on the problems and possibilities that developed in doing fieldwork "on both sides of the divining table" (47). However, the fascinating positioning of author as divinatory participant soon fades completely from the ethnography, and readers are left wondering about her absent role in much of the proceedings (especially given the household centric nature of her data). This is most keenly felt in later discussions on intersubjectivity, where we wonder how Swancutt the ethnographer-diviner was herself positioned in the shared assumptions and "'intersubjective' relations that people, spirits, animals and other 'subjects' produce through face-to-face interactions" (154).

These are hardly critiques; rather, they are exciting possibilities raised by what is a compelling and engrossing study. *Fortune and the Cursed* will be of great interest to scholars working on the anthropology of Inner Asian religions, or the interdependency of ritual practice, epistemologies of healing, and cultural invention more broadly.

References

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Matthew King
University of Toronto