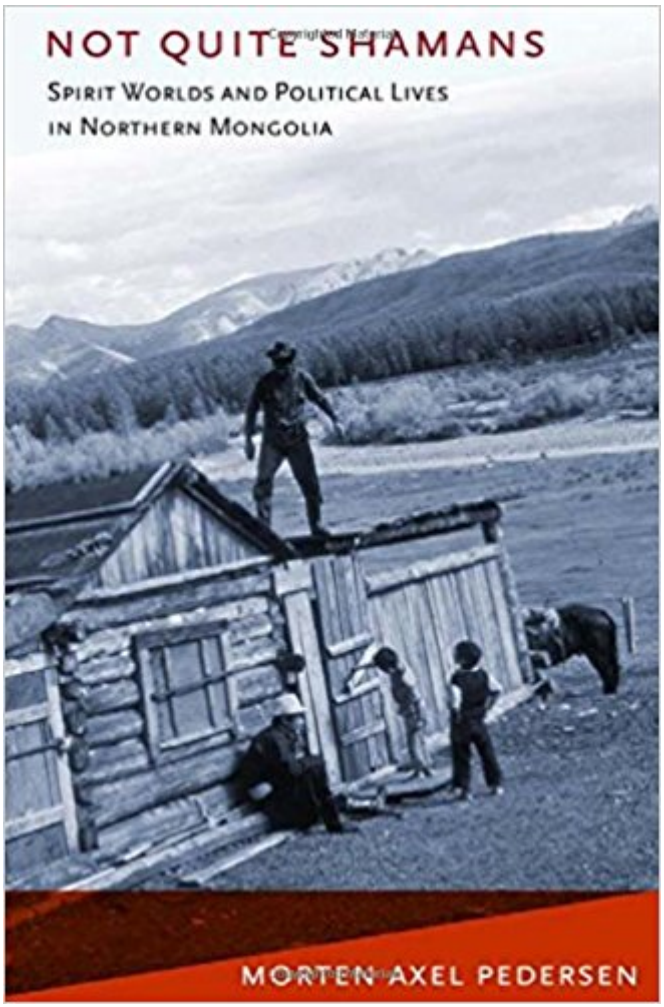
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Not Quite Shamans: Spirit Worlds And Political Lives In Northern Mongolia (Culture And Society After Socialism)



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Synopsis

The forms of contemporary society and politics are often understood to be diametrically opposed to any expression of the supernatural; what happens when those forms are themselves regarded as manifestations of spirits and other occult phenomena? In Not Quite Shamans, Morten Axel Pedersen explores how the Darhad people of Northern Mongolia's remote Shishged Valley have understood and responded to the disruptive transition to postsocialism by engaging with shamanic beliefs and practices associated with the past.For much of the twentieth century, Mongolia's communist rulers attempted to eradicate shamanism and the shamans who once served as spiritual guides and community leaders. With the transition from a collectivized economy and a one-party state to a global capitalist market and liberal democracy in the 1990s, the people of the Shishged were plunged into a new and harsh world that seemed beyond their control.
"Not-quite-shamans"Ã¢â ¬â ¢young, unemployed men whose undirected energies erupted in unpredictable, frightening bouts of violence and drunkenness that seemed occult in their excessÃ¢â ¬â ¢ became a serious threat to the fabric of community life. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in Northern Mongolia, Pedersen details how, for many Darhads, the postsocialist state itself has become shamanic in nature.In the ideal version of traditional Darhad shamanism, shamans can control when and for what purpose their souls travel, whether to other bodies, landscapes, or worlds. Conversely, caught between uncontrollable spiritual powers and an excessive display of physical force, the "not-quite-shamans" embody the chaotic formsÃ¢â ¬â ¢the free market, neoliberal reform, and government corruptionÃ¢â ¬â ¢that have created such upheaval in peoples' lives. As an experimental ethnography of recent political and economic transformations in Mongolia through the defamiliarizing prism of shamans and their lack, Not Quite Shamans is an attempt to write about as well as theorize postsocialism, and shamanism, in a new way.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Not Quite Shamans is a beautifully written, rich, and detailed ethnographic account of a remote corner of postsocialist Mongolia. Empathetic but never apologetic, Pedersen presents a balanced account of what was certainly a very arduous, evenlife-threatening, fieldwork research. . . . [N]ot Quite Shamans will certainly become a seminal text, not only for Mongolian and Inner Asian specialists but indeed as a detailed and perceptive analysis of postsocialism and shamanism."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Franck BillÃƒÂ©, Current Anthropology (April 2013) "Not Quite Shamans is a welcome contribution to the literature of the occult and supernatural, shamanism, postsocialism, and Mongolia. . . . Many anthropologists of modernity, postcolonialism, and postsocialism will find exciting and useful conversations and ideas in this book. . . . [T]he book successfully takes shamanism away from the notion of exotic and traditional but shows its modernities and many ways in which shamanism "spills over [its] forms" quintessential and even modern and incomplete." Ã¢â ¬â ¢Manduhai Buyandelger, American Anthropologist (March 2013) "It is tricky to define anything using a negative, especially in a book title. Yet Morten Pedersen has succeeded in making his theme of perpetual transitional instability in Mongolia one that centers on the concept of "not quite shamans." He argues that those Mongolian shamans of the Darhad region conventionally trained to control dark spirit worlds have all but disappeared, given the repressions and pressures of communists, and before them, Buddhists. . . . Pedersen’s work is a fine contribution to the anthropological literature on Mongolia. . . ."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, Anthropology and Humanism (Vol. 37, Issue 2, 2012) "In this book, the author claims that the agsan ataman is a typical image of a rural village in postsocialist Mongolia. As the instrument of occult forces whose manifestation is beyond his control, the agsan person is like a shaman, but not quite (p. 4). The author calls his study ’shamanism without shamans’, because he studied not proper shamans but half-shamans and shaman-like cases. . . . [T]his work is an enormous contribution to studies deconstructing shamanism."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Bumochir Dulam, Nationalities Papers (Nov. 2012) "A fascinating journey through the hitherto little remarked complexities of post-socialist rural Mongolia, where formerly suppressed and semi-destroyed shamanic and Buddhist traditions have resurfaced

to compete with one another and also with modernity. . . . Composed with scholarly erudition, thoughtful reflection, and true storyteller acumen, this engaging account fills a significant void in understanding contemporary Mongolian society. Its wealth of useful ethnographic and linguistic detail offers much to anthropologists and social historians alike. Summing up: Highly recommended."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Choice (December 2011)"Not Quite Shamans is based on original and courageous fieldwork in an exceptional setting; Morten Axel Pedersen develops a sophisticated and very ambitious argument; he brings to life the notion of 'not quite shamans' as relevant for understanding the void in postsocialist Mongolia after very radical purges of Buddhist lamas and local shamans."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Peter L. Geschiere, University of Amsterdam, author of The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa"This is anthropology at its best: full of both theoretical and ethnographic surprises. In northern Mongolia, where the institutions of encompassing social order, both Buddhist and socialist, have collapsed or fragmented into shards, rowdy drunks are almost shamans, jokes are discerning, and elections resemble sÃƒÂ©ances. Not Quite Shamans is a theoretically sophisticated ethnography of one post-socialist hinterland; it is also a provocative evocation of the unsettled spirits that shake all of us in the wake of twentieth-century modernity."Ã¢â ¬â ¢Anna Tsing, author of Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection

Morten Axel Pedersen is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Copenhagen.

An outstanding ethnography born of the fashionable "ontological" tendency. But much more than just fashion! Pedersen's book is refreshingly light on programmatic prose, and strong on face-to-face study. He has a knack for capturing tacit cultural currents that are just "in the air," like the elusive post-soviet idea of spirit intervention, At the same time, he's realistic about the harsh daily conditions of inner Asia. A skillful writer with true ethnographic vocation, Pedersen has give us a good new option for mid-level undergrad course use.

Provocative, valuable and interesting reading for anyone interested in the "frame" or ontological discourse of how anthropology can "understand" shamanism in Northern Mongolia. While I do not agree with all of Pederson's perspectives, this is an important work and a real original contribution.

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