

“UNTITLED DOCUMENTARY FILM PROJECT”

Feature Length Documentary Animation Film

Treatment

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TEARS OF THE SKY: Coming Home To Meeting with Ancient Healers in Contemporary Mongolia

Short Synopsys: I propose to complete a feature length international documentary film project which will chronicle my journey from America back to my home country of Mongolia after twenty years of absence in search of my Shamanic identity as I study, research, experience and discover first-hand about Mongolian Shamanism.

The “Untitled Mongolian Documentary Film” project chronicles/follows the journey of the marginal woman on a spiritual, metaphysical and dream voyage from her home in the West/America and returning back to her womb in the East/Mongolia for the first time in twenty years in pursuit of a life altering quest/pilgrimage to explore and discover her Shamanic identity. While I appreciate all that I had learned from the established traditions of extroverted America to the refined esoteric practices of Asian religions, the wisdom of indigenous Shamans and the practice of Shamanism is what ultimately continue to draw me home to the primordial human spiritual experience I seek.

Through the powerful and universal medium of film as art, I seek to share my own private story/journey/exploration of shamanism into Western/world comprehension. My documentary film project brings various personal, social and political propositions to light to help inform and spark strong constructive dialogue for an enhanced peaceful world community.

What is the central argument of your proposed film?

Shamanism in Mongolia has remained ingrained in the nomadic spirit of its people since ancient times. Originating in the time of the Stone Age hunters during the Palaeolithic age over 40,000 years ago. Shamanism has managed to survive against enormous odds, centuries of persecution by Buddhists and Stalinist efforts to eradicate this ancient tradition. Mongolia, Inner Asia, and Siberia are the cradles of classical shamanism, and gave birth to the modern term itself. Shamanism is humankind’s earliest and perhaps most universal expression of spirituality, as it is found in one form or another in nearly every culture across the world.

Mongolia’s shift to neoliberal capitalism in the early ‘90s allowed long-suppressed shamanic practices to surface. In 1990 there were fewer than a dozen practising Shamans left in all of Mongolia; in 2017, there are an estimated 10,000 or more Shamans at work healing and divining. In the past two decades, a vast number of shamans have appeared and reappeared in Mongolia, and Shamanism and the concepts and theories connected to it have started to gain more and more popularity. Mongolia has seen a recent resurgence of Tengerism, an ancient animistic practice in which Shamans channel ancestral spirits. The spirits literally use the body and mouth of the Shaman—to provide advice, healing, community therapy, even ancient levity.

In a sense, Tengerism is monotheistic. Tenger, or the “Eternal Blue Sky,” is an omnipotent, omnipresent deity from which all power and knowledge springs. Ancestral spirits and other spiritual entities hang out in the heavens—plural. They are very close to Tenger and that proximity affords them enhanced wisdom. A Shaman is a person selected by his or her ancestral spirits to serve as a bridge between the spirits and regular folks.

This is an unprecedented, thousand-fold increase in a single generation. The Communist Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party that reigned from 1921 to 1990 suppressed all religious expression. After centuries of Buddhist and later Communist persecution in Mongolia, it is a testament to the effectiveness of Shamanism that it has not only survived but is making an explosive comeback just as Mongolians, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, face a modern world free of overarching political and religious shackles for the first time in many generations. Some Shamans kept the practice alive “underground,” but many family lineages’ traditions were lost or obscured. During the political violence that shook the country in the late ‘30s (mirroring the Soviet Union’s Great Purge), many people lost their parents and/or their handwritten genealogies, obliterating a connection between them and their more distant ancestors. Before coming under Soviet influence, cultural expression was repressed by the Qing Dynasty of China. Mongolians haven’t been free to express their indigenous identity for several hundred years.

Even though some Mongolians insist that Shamans can only be from a certain family background, many now agree that long ignored ancestral spirits have been waiting for the return of shamanism, and they seek individuals not so much for a pedigree as for accelerated Shamanic capacity. These are exciting times for the rebirth of shamanism.

According to Mongolian-born MIT professor Manduhai Buyandelger, the spirits were not happy about being ignored for so long. In her 2013 book, *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia*, Manduhai describes the marginalized, indigenous Buryat people of the northeast as inundated by angry spirits demanding propitiation via Shamanic mediation following the sudden introduction of capitalism, which led to widespread poverty across the country. When Mongolians propitiated forgotten origin spirits to cope with their woes, Buyandelger writes in her book’s introduction, they “expanded almost inadvertently into a cultural production of history.”

Manduhai explains in *Tragic Spirits*, “Shamanism has not become a part of capitalism and created monetary profit, which is what many people want from their engagement with it, either as shamans or clients. Instead of bringing good fortune and the power to attract money, shamanism enables its adherents to build a mobile history through remembering.”

The Shaman is a mysterious figure—seer of the unseen, explorer of other worlds, messenger of the spirits, and doctor of the human soul. Taught by the spirits how to die and be reborn, to heal, and to prophesy, Shamans serve their communities with their unique skills. For the Shaman, the universe is not a pointless mechanism but a conscious existence, vibrating with intelligence and life force. The Shaman’s view of the world far transcends our ordinary ideas about time, space, and the nature of reality; thought is as real as matter, space contains power, time is less linear, and invisible forces permeate everything. Even inanimate objects have souls, and are part of a fabric of consciousness without limit. Unlike religious belief systems, shamanism is based on direct experience and tangible results. If Shamans don’t regularly get healing and divination results that are helpful to their communities, they lose their livelihood.

Shamans play an important role maintaining the “teghsh”, the “balance” of the community. They counsel a path of moderation in one’s actions and reverence for the natural world, which they view as mother to humanity. Mongolians believe that if natural resources are taken without thanking the spirits for what they have given, those resources will not be replaced. Unlike many other cultures whose Shamanic traditions were undermined by modern civilization, shamans in Mongolia continue to play a vital role as guardians of the environment, the community, and the natural order.

The Shaman is a kind of a priest or medium who acts as a conduit between the human world and the realm of the gods, demons and spirits of ancestors. Shamanism is a vast mental and emotional adventure, one in which the patient as well as the Shaman healer are involved. Through brave journey and efforts, the Shaman helps his patients transcend their normal ordinary definition of reality, including the definition of them selves as ill. The Shaman shows his patients that they are not emotionally and spiritually alone in their struggles against illness and death. The Shaman shares his special powers and convinces his patients, on a deep level of consciousness, that another human is willing to offer up his own self to help them. The Shaman’s self-sacrifice calls forth a corresponding emotional commitment from his patients, a sense of obligation to struggle alongside the Shaman to save ones self, caring and curing go hand in hand.

Shamans tackle a wide range of illnesses, principally psychological conditions including mental illness, schizophrenia, epilepsy, interpersonal problems, soul loss, and curses. They also treat physical conditions such as growths and skin conditions, headaches and heart and liver problems. Treatment rituals eclectically combine many different activities, using altered states of consciousness to consult with and influence spirits, drumming, chanting and prayers, emanating healing bioenergies from the shaman’s hands. Ritual offerings of sacrificed sheep, vodka, and colored cloth, rituals in nature, especially at springs and cleansing baths. Most of these healing practices take place on an individual basis, in the “office” of the healer, much as the practice of a psychotherapist in western models of healing.

When Western travellers and explorers first encountered Shamans in tribal cultures, they did not know what to make of them. Whether viewed from a religious perspective, which was typical in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or from a psychological standpoint, as characterized by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the shaman appeared strange and dangerous. From a traditional Christian perspective, Shamans dealt with spirits that Christianity did not recognize or consider to be accessible and beneficial to human beings: the spirits of animals, the land, the elements, the dead. Usually the Shaman’s helping spirits were misinterpreted by Christian observers as ‘evil spirits’ or ‘demons’. When viewed in the modern mental health terms, Shamans seemed sick, delusional or outright crazy. A Shaman talks to trees, rocks and other supposedly non-intelligent entities and claims to shape shift into other forms, to visit invisible realms and to consort with the dead. It took several centuries of contact with tribal peoples for Westerner academics to overcome their misconceptions and appreciate Shamans for their healing abilities, insights into human behaviour and their role in maintaining harmony within their communities.

My Story, The Beckoning

From the age of three my mother recalls I wanted to grow up and become a “Bear” (invoking Bear spirit). I regularly had out-of-body astral floating experiences that defied explanation and intuitive perceptions, dreams so vivid sometimes I did not know how to pull my floating self back into myself. These experiences and memories never left me, they only made me curious.

My name is Eriko Tsogo, I am a Mongolian American woman artist, filmmaker, cancer survivor, sexual abuse survivor, immigrant rights activist, civic engagement project developer, DACA recipient, and most importantly a Mongolian Shaman due to accept my Shamanic calling in my home country of Mongolia. Prior to learning I had the calling, I have personally experienced many miraculous healings, and accurate divinations as both a Shamanic practitioner and a client. The possibility of experiencing other worlds during this lifetime, the ability to transcend between the conscious and subconscious realms completely fascinates, intrigues, and challenges the capacity of both my biological and creative mind to this day.

I was born on September 27th, 1990 in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia during the downfall of Communism, during the year of the White Horse Cultural Revolution into a family of artists. Seeking security and a better means for life, my young parents both in their early twenties at the time moved to neighbouring Hungary while I was still a few months old. Life was hard, we were poor. My parents were absent through majority my childhood in Hungary because of finances. They slaved away day and night around the clock working at an ironing factory along with thousands of other immigrants in order to afford boarding school for me. From the ages of 3-7 I lived at my boarding school along with other international students, the school culture became my life.

Job opportunities soon proved limited in Hungary, so my family and I briefly went back to Mongolia for over a year in 1997. In the late 90’s, the first wave of Mongolian students came to the United States to pursue graduate schooling, some ending up permanently immigrating to the states. America was the ultimate destination, land of dreams for many including my family. After

much effort and struggle through the visa process, my father's visa was granted and he made way to America in 1998. A year later, he had established somewhat of a footing in Denver, Colorado and proceeded to bring my mother and I.

My family and I officially immigrated to the United States in April of 1999, shortly after my younger sister was born in Denver the same year. I have been in America unable to leave or return for as old as my younger sister is. Up until the age of 23 I was considered undocumented and had learned to live my life in repression and secrecy under the table. But after Obama came into Administration, I was finally able to acquire my DACA status (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) including legal work authorization in 2013. Although I've had a politically tumultuous multicultural upbringing, I have spent most of my life from the impressionable age of adolescence to adulthood in America, in Western society. I am the epitome of marginalization and diversity. My sense of identity today is greatly informed, shaped equally by both the clashing and fusing of my Eastern and Western roots.

As an adolescent growing up in America, the metaphysical magic I experienced as a child started increasing exponentially through my experiences of defiance, angst, and provocation in trying to find myself, further turning my world upside-down. My awareness of these unseen, indefinable experiences as reoccurring and ordinary to me but not to others, or to the mass mainstream Western culture excluded me from being accepted as normal. Not understanding what was going on with me, I inadvertently internalized my metaphysical experiences as bad and shameful, but the friction inside compelled me to seek answers. I realized that (I had) access to realms reached by the founders of many religions was more than just possible.

In Mongolia, becoming a Shaman is often just as much of a curse as it is a blessing. Shamans are chosen by the spirits at birth. Those with the potential for Shaman hood have "Ug" meaning 'root/stem', most often they have Shaman ancestors in the family. To become a Shaman is to be dismembered as a person, for the flesh body to die and to be reborn into something else. There are two ways of arriving at Shaman hood; the first is great sickness, where a messenger from the spirit world selects the Shaman for the job. The arrival of this representative is usually announced by the chosen person falling seriously ill or suffering hallucinations. An experienced shaman is called in to diagnose/cure the sick person and check the patient possessed by a spirit, indicating that he or she had been chosen to be a shaman. The second method of invocation is to be literally hit by lightning or some type of magnificent natural disaster.

I was called to Mongolian Shamanism and to my Shamanic calling in what could only be described as a circuitous path, at first by a sudden and long bout in unexplained degrading health which slowly grew to psychological torment. Ailments first started in my thyroid, then continued through my pancreas, liver, digestive system, lower abdomen, and kidneys. In 2013 I was diagnosed with Thyroid cancer, I weighed 85 pounds bone frail with all my hair falling out to point of baldness. My physical state started to affect my mental health. Also being as naïve, young and completely foreign to the Shaman concept or faith, I was convinced I was going insane. Even during my initial period of Shaman sickness, I remained honest about my experiences including visions and hallucinations, nightmares and dreams that I was experiencing. It felt impossible to bear the mental anguish inside; I attempted suicide many times over during my period of Shaman sickness. But my lowest albeit revelatory moment came about from an instance when I had shared too openly about my visions with my family, who became panicked and with the help of my benefactor/respected mentor, came to my side and involuntarily submitted me to a nine day stint in hell inside a mental asylum.

It took me a long time to adhere and accept the notion that I had a Shamanic calling. Transfixed in the center of the opposite Western world where urbanism, speed and digitization is rampant and individuation glorified, I remained stuck frozen vacillating between the marginal cusp of Eastern and Western psychology and modes of belief. Not ever fully abiding into one or the other but informed by both sides, I was going mad trying to figure out what is what, right from wrong, truth from falsehood. I could not fathom the concept of such an archaic ancient religion selecting me. For what? What was the purpose? And why? It could be anybody else, why me?

Equipped with fear, doubt, and desperate for relief - I dealt with the mental and physical infrequencies through what was most common, familiar and easy for me at the time by way of the Western health care system which started a dangerous albeit intriguing journey into the crevices of Western psychology. Against my every fibre of being, for over a year, I subscribed to the Western mode of mental health treatment by forcing myself to take antidepressants so I could become "manageable" and not an irritant to my family or to society.

The year I took antidepressants, I lost myself completely. I did not recognize myself or my new mannerisms anymore. Horrible symptoms followed the medication like insomnia, lack of appetite, night sweats, chronic diarrhoea, inclination towards heightened behavioural OCD habits like skin picking. I had no more fire, drive, to want, to desire, to seek, to search, to love. My emotions were cut to an even kneel. I was standing inside a hollow warehouse shouting but no one could hear me. Searching for the semblance of a tiny haven; in between the friction of East and West, I rode the lively waves into the deep dark reassesses of the human psychology for many years. My "Wrong Women, Myths from Sky" art series was born during this period.

I lost faith in the Western health care system when I saw myself transforming into an even worse person than I was before when I was suffering through my Shamanic sickness in raw form. Once I stopped believing in Western medicine, there was no turning back for me. Pursuing the path of the Mongolian Shaman hood was not a choice but compared to its Western counterpart, the tradition had a defiantly better, safer, natural holistic approach to treatment and healing. Mongolian Shamanism is timeless, the casual nature of the ceremony is inherent to the practice.

Mongolian Shamanism advocates for the equilibrium and connection between the mental and physical unlike Western medicine which solely focused on the eradication/difference/masking of symptoms, the immediacy of relief, and instant gratification without truly remedying the root cause of the problem. Shamanism represents and demands a much higher level of awareness, conscious frequency and internal work that I was completely willing to sacrifice my life for. Since the start of my Shamanic sickness, I have sought the help and validation from many different well known indigenous Shamans including a Korean Shaman in Colorado, a Native American Shaman in Arizona, a few Mongolian Shamans in Denver and Chicago, and even prestigious government Shamans in Mongolia to make sure and cross reference the validity of my calling. Each one of the Shamans would say the same

thing, verifying my condition as true and valid Shamans vocation, furthermore adding that I have a hereditary calling transcending from my mother's side of the family and passed onto me.

It is essential to bear in mind that the revival of Shamanism in Mongolia is mostly about the renaissance of Buddhism, and Shamanism plays a more and more significant but still a secondary role in the religious life of contemporary Mongolians. The fact that Mongolians often think of Shamanism as their primeval religion or the core of the Mongolian way of thinking, and the essence of nomadism and Mongolness makes Shamanism provoke the attention of an increasingly wider public. Primarily it is the ancientness of Shamanism that makes people think that it is more ingenious to Mongols than Buddhism.

Over the years, I have grown more accustomed to and adapted to the ancient path, beliefs and ritualistic healing practices of Mongolian Shamanism as my own. Today my faith and belief in Shamanism is absolute truth. I have accepted that I am destined to become/live the life of a Mongolian Shaman so I can have a chance at recovering the history of my people through Shamanic practice. Before my ancestor spirits become vengeful over being abandoned, I must first appease the spirits by becoming an official conduit/messenger to the spirits by way of "Ug" (stem/root) blood oath traditional acceptance ceremony on native Mongolian soil. (The belief goes) To not accept my Shamanic calling will ultimately risk death or a short life filled with mental and physical anguish.

Filming in Mongolia

In the Mongolian cultural region and even within the borders of Mongolia there are a number of Shamanic traditions, which can greatly differ from each other, but the ways of becoming a shaman are very similar in all of them. Every Shamanic circle has its own traditions, and shamans belonging to the same ethnic group can differ from each other if they are trained by different Shaman masters/teachers.

In filming my documentary in Mongolia, I begin with the knowledge that shamanic worlds are as real for my Shaman interviewees as they are for me. I seek to travel through Mongolia's famous Shaman provinces/territories and interview a diverse group of provincial/territory Shamans. I am choosing an unconventional filming approach to research in Mongolia; I seek to journey over the steppes to attend Shamanic ceremonies, healings, and divinations, interviewing as many shamans as possible and acquire their knowledge. I seek to hear, receive, and report what they have to say about Mongolian Shamanism and the recent surge of Shaman mushrooming phenomena including getting myself and the authenticity of my Shamanic calling tested, as well as getting insight into their personal cosmologies and techniques, new depths and varieties.

Major points in the film would be my arrival in Mongolia, the Shaman initiation ceremony, and the return back to America. After twenty years of separation from my homeland, there will be profound emotional revelations I will experience in seeing the sight of my land and relatives for the first time. In returning back to the US; the question remains whether I am able to successfully adapt/practice the anti-normative lifestyle of my new Shamanic identity in Western society.

The documentary will be filmed equal parts between America and Mongolia, each country will roughly require about a month and half to two months filming period in each place. Pre and postproduction processes can vary from three to six months. I plan to employ separate film production crews in each perspective country to help minimize costs. Filming will deploy a pragmatic approach with philosophical undertones, shot in Cinema Verite style of shooting in real time. Stylistically, I aim to bring the same visual/intuitive/quixotic aesthetic sensibilities I have with paper to the screen. Using an amalgamation of video footage and animation to contrast between the unfolding of current 'real' events and the surreal dreamscapes of the 'hyperreal'. The animation could be utilized to communicate past personal oral history/memory reconstructs; gestural emotions/imagined dreams sequences, etc.

How does your film project advance or challenge current thinking?

- I seek to help create/bridge a more homogeneous form of governance, understanding, connection and exchange between the East and West modes of pervasive thought government and perception.
- To help inspire dialogue and enrich public understanding regarding the education, integration of adopting/applying the effective aspects/methods of indigenous treatment, healing and approach over the maladaptive, conventional and often pervasively financialized Western health care system.
- My film seeks to express the embattled emotional middle space of the marginal woman, one who lives in two worlds in both of which a stranger.
- The need to be cautious in the way we characterize neo-liberalism as monolithic, which feeds into its internal mythology as being totalizing in its rampant materialism. Even as neoliberalism attempts to promote a uniform framework around the globe, it becomes embedded within historical elements of culture and ideology that manifests itself in a variety of practices. In Mongolia, such practices manifest themselves through shamanism and the identification of a family's misfortune with unpropitiated origin spirits. Because shamanism provides Mongolians with a culturally salient explanation for their misfortunes, they were able to re-appropriate the legitimization of inequality away from the state. By recognizing neo-liberalism as culturally and historical contextualized, we can discover alternatives that might better promote equality across class and gender.
- I seek to offer analysis of the way Mongolian economics, politics, gender, and other factors influence the spirit world and the crucial workings of cultural memory.
- How does indigenous practices help rebuild cultural identity?

- The varying spectrums of the marginalized contemporary identity; the loss and search of personal identity.
- Considerations to broader themes of globalization, migration, urbanization, spirituality, preservation of ethnic cultures, and the advocacy for connection between man and the natural world.
- History (Those who fully subscribe to the Mongolian Shamanic practice believe that the spirits returned and directly re-taught the traditions. Sceptics, and most Western culture deem it “imagined history” which is no less valid in recreating an identity and a religion. It is only less valid from the standpoint of “technical history”.)
- Memory (How does the individual and collective memory enable the mobile history and development of Mongolian Shamanism?)
- Identity in institutional limbo.
- Religion as compound faith vs fraud.
- Monotheism versus neo-liberal Shamanism
- Politically Mongolia went from downfall of Communism to Neo-liberal Capitalism. How does this disjointed structure of capitalism contradict contemporary Mongolian Shamanic practice?
- Is the resurgence of Mongolian Shamanism a form of radical nationalism or call for the integration of man and the natural world during a time when the natural world order is fast losing, losing against the rapid infestation of abundant super capital consumerism?
- What is Neo-Shamanism or Contemporary Shamanism or Urban Shamanism in Mongolia?
- How is the mutation and movement of sub Shamanic movements within Mongolia such as Neo Shamanism, Contemporary Shamanism and Urban Shamanism an extension of the traditional practice?
- In contemporary Mongolia, how does one distinguish between the authentic and fraudulent Shamans?
- How is such an ancient practice resurging, resilient in contemporary Mongolian society? How does this resurgence reflect the fractured contemporary Mongolian society and pervasive government?
- Is the resurgence of Mongolian Shamanism an attempt for radical nationalism, revival of nationalistic pride? Is the revival of shamanism in Mongolia a cult of Chinggis Khan?
- In returning home, I come out transformed, changed. What happens after? How do I take my newfound Shaman identity back to America and cooperatively work as an indigenous healer within a community/culture of sceptics who often rely on scientific evidence as absolute truth?

Who is/are the intended audience/s of your film?

The target audience for my documentary film project is the world, primary focus on America and Mongolia. Mongolian shamans, largely unaware that shamanism has become a practice and subject of study outside their country, often assume, quite rightly, that outsiders cannot possibly understand their inner experiences.

The film aims to dispel and help rewrite, reprogram the one dimensional, limited, Western misconceptions about Shamanism and the Shamans as more than “witch doctors”, “voodoo”, or “indigenous spiritual jargon”, to validate and bring to light the integral role of the Shaman as peace keeper within the community. To help inspire dialogue and enrich public understanding regarding the education, integration of adopting/applying the effective aspects/methods of indigenous treatment, healing and approach over the maladaptive, conventional and often pervasively financialized Western health care system.