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Beyond Mind– Body Dualism

Pluralistic Concepts of the Soul in Mongolian Shamanistic Traditions

Abstract: *Soul belief is a universal of human culture and belief in multiple souls is common, especially in pre-modern traditions. This essay illustrates how a three-folded structure appears in the soul concepts of Mongolian shamanistic traditions. The reported accounts of the three souls among various Mongolian ethnic groups are somewhat divergent — especially in their consciousness-related attributes — which may reflect the cultural bias of data collectors, inconsistencies between data providers, and the evolution of these concepts due to historical events, socio-economic changes, and external cultural influences. Despite these confounding effects, the soul concept of Mongolian shamanism is similar in its pluralism to the beliefs of many other cultures. Mongolian Indigenous concepts and their descriptions reveal key elements of consciousness. Although these soul concepts evoke spiritual interpretations, they nevertheless reflect aspects of an*

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innately-disposed mindset which extends conceptualizations of consciousness beyond mind–body dualism.

Keywords: consciousness; cross-cultural; Indigenous concepts; mind–body problem; soul.

1. Introduction

Shamanism is a pre-agricultural cultural heritage once shared by ancient foraging communities worldwide. While these practices were lost in historical time across most of the world, cross-cultural studies (Winkelman, 1992; 2012) and archaeological findings (Winkelman, 2002) indicate that shamanic activity was present from the beginning of cultural evolution (Winkelman, 2010). These ancient practices have been found all around the world among pre-modern Indigenous people in Siberia, Central Asia, Africa, North and South America, Northern Europe, Australia, and Polynesia (Narby and Huxley, 2001). Despite cultural variations in language and social customs, there are trans-cultural commonalities in foraging shamanism worldwide that reflect neurognostic bases (Winkelman, 2010; 2013). This neurognostic background is manifested in the near-universal features of shamanism emphasized by Michael Harner (1990) and Roger Walsh (1990), and which correspond to neurological principles (Winkelman, 2010; 2015). These neurological bases of shamanic practice reflect the stance of this review, namely that concepts of the various Indigenous soul aspects that exhibit similarities cross-culturally must be understood as based on neurognostic foundations.

This essay compares previous research reporting cross-cultural similarities in notions of the soul with those reported among Mongol ethnic groups as a basis for formulating new frameworks for considering mind, consciousness, and body. Nonetheless it is difficult to employ an exhaustively systematic approach because terms used and their interpretations vary by linguistic and cultural differences among the Mongols. Even informed Indigenous sources are inconsistent or imprecise in their reports, for instance investigators such as Charles Bawden (1962) who consider diverse soul terms (i.e. Mongolian *amin*, *sünesün*, *sülde*)⁴ as partly interchangeable in spite of a long history of

⁴ In the text these emic terms will be used mostly with some exceptions. Whenever we explicitly name an ethnic group in context of a soul component, we choose the corresponding dialect.

their differentiation. Even scientific studies are biased by culture-bound concepts held by investigators (Bremmer, 1983). We combine emic and comparative perspectives to identify patterns in these diverse soul concepts and illustrate their usefulness in guiding new models of consciousness.

2. Soul Pluralism

Osborne Wilson (1998) noted that anthropology has identified belief in a soul as a universal cultural element, and suggested that science needs to investigate what predisposes people to believe in a soul and to develop similar mythologies about its nature. Comparative investigations of the soul concept expressed in diverse cultures noted that, despite complex and variable conceptualizations across cultures, the plurality of the soul concept — especially its tripartite nature — is the rule rather than the exception (Frecska, Moro and Wesselman, 2011).

The recognition of soul pluralism evolved slowly in Western academia. Edward Burnett Tylor initiated anthropological studies of soul concepts in defining animism as a doctrine of the soul. Tylor's definition of 'soul' emphasized a unitary concept, with the most important soul attributes described by reference to then available ethnographic studies:

The conception of a personal soul or spirit among the... races, may be defined as follows: It is a thin unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapour, film, or shadow; the cause of life and thought in the individual it animates; independently possessing the personal consciousness and volition of its corporal owner, past or present; capable of leaving the body far behind, to flash swiftly from place to place; mostly impalpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power, and especially appearing to men waking or asleep as a phantasm separate from the body of which it bears the likeness; continuing to exist and appear to men after the death of that body; able to enter into, possess, and act in the bodies of other men, of animals, and even of things. (Tylor, 1871, p. 387)

Tylor's conceptualization of the soul exhibits concerns central for consciousness studies — personal consciousness and volition, a likeness to the body, acting through and animating the body. Wilhelm Wundt (1920) expanded Tylor's notion to characterize the soul as pluralistic and noted that, consequently, the term 'soul' cannot be used comparatively with only reference to meanings in Western traditions.

This pluralistic perspective was elaborated by Sanskritist Ernst Arbman (1926). He separated the soul inhabiting the body and

endowing it with life and action from the free-soul, an unencumbered soul-aspect embodying the individual's non-physical mode of existence not only after death but also in dreams, trances, and other altered states of consciousness (ASCs). While Arbman addressed the issue of duality, he implicitly wrote about triplicity since he combined two soul-parts for which some cultures have separate names. Arbman's 'body soul' can be divided into components. Typically, it falls into two categories, one of which is the 'life-soul', the vital force, frequently identified with the breath, while the other is the 'ego-soul', the source of wilful action and decision making.

Arbman's pupil Åke Hultkrantz (1953) followed his mentor's stance, speaking about dualism while describing a trinity. In this regard Arbman and Hultkrantz were apparently more interested in the myths regarding the afterlife (related closely to the free-soul) than with the soul concepts explaining Indigenous psychology; therefore, they paid less attention to the 'life-soul' and 'ego-soul' as independent entities.

Nonetheless, we feel that the tripartite nature of the soul is clearly displayed in numerous cultural groups. Furthermore, this differentiation is manifested in a distinctive cluster of attributes that adhere to each type, distinguishing their central features. We propose that this soul typology accentuates what can be construed as physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the person; and these emphasize distinctions that constitute psychodynamic aspects inherent to the person expressed in notions emphasizing body, mind, and consciousness. Their features are presented in Table 1.

This essay examines Mongolian shamanistic beliefs to illustrate their similarity to this transcultural tripartite soul concept, revealing underlying biogenetic structures that provide perspectives to help transcend Western conceptualizations of consciousness embodied in mind-body dualism. Since Western concepts of the soul may be inappropriate for other cultures with distinct conceptual structures, we use Indigenous emic terms as much as possible. This avoids the problem of whether terms such as self, soul, or others are suitable for translating concepts expressed in Mongolian culture. Nonetheless, our effort is to illustrate that Mongolian distinctions are comparable to the tripartite soul concepts presented in Table 1 and reveal different psychodynamic aspects inherent to the person.

Soul Aspects with Attributes and their Relationships*			
	Physical	Mental	Spiritual
	(personal unconscious, body, life, vitality, breath, deadly separation, emotions, flesh and blood, maternal side, energetic, restorative, inter-face function)	(consciousness, mind, thinking, personality, will, charisma, dignity, morality, bones, paternal side, protective, directive, shadow, dreamer, receiver function)	(collective unconscious, immortality, self, passive but not dispassionate, silent observer, creation, intuition, separation, soul loss, haunting, the Source, causes dreams)
after			
Ernst	life-soul	ego-soul	free-soul
Arbman			
Lakota			
Sioux	woniya	nagi	nagila
Inuit	anerneq	ateq	tarneq
Shuar	arutam	muisak	nekás
Kwawu	saman	sunsum	ɔkra
Kahuna	unihipili	uhane	aumakua
Yakut	tyn	kut	sür
Buryat			
Mongol	amin	hülde	hünehen

*Not all of the attributes are present in every tradition's belief system and there are discrepancies, inconsistencies in their relationship with the listed soul aspects (e.g. the localization of emotions, memories, personality may vary between cultures). In those cultures where soul dualism is the tradition (e.g. Hurons, Shoshones), one may notice that the vital (life-soul) and immortal (free-soul) aspects are usually maintained and the attributes of the mental principle (if there is any) are lumped with either one of the others. If a tradition adheres to more than three soul components, the extra souls usually have some auxiliary role or the soul types reflect different social status.

Table 1. The plurality of soul concepts from Frecska, Moro and Wesselman (2011).

Therefore, this essay attempts to accommodate emic and etic terms and concepts. Mongolist scholars have made efforts to clarify terminological distinction among the souls, but Bawden (1962) illustrates the continued problems with the interchangeable use of vocabulary associated with the soul (*sünesün*, *amin*) and vitality (*sür*, *sülde*). However, adhering strictly to emic terms presents problems from differences among dialects and the lack of adequate terminological distinctions and use of Indigenous words by ethnographers. But etic words (like 'spirit', 'self', or 'genius') engage an ambiguous Western terminology and their problematic applicability to another culture. For

example, restricting the meaning of ‘soul’ only to the immortal part of a being prevents inclusion of the emic concepts of other ‘souls’ that die.

The ethnographic section of this essay avoids etic terminology as much as possible by focusing on emic terms of specific ethnic groups, specifically the Buryat, where we employ emic words like: *sünesün* or in contemporary Mongolian *süns*; *amin* or *amin süns*; and *sülde* or *sür sild*. But we cannot escape using the word ‘souls’ in the plural in an inclusive way of referring to diverse Indigenous concepts. The way we use ‘soul’ or ‘souls’ is not tied to some notion of personal essence, but rather as an inclusive reference to diverse emic descriptions of different types of human personal spiritual qualities and their functions. Recognizing that the narrow Western meaning of the soul is inappropriate for other cultures, we characterize our efforts as an attempt to identify different psychodynamic aspects inherent to the person and forms of consciousness reflected in the emic concepts.

3. Diversity and Similarities in Mongolian Soul Concepts

The Hungarian ethnologist Vilmos Diószegi engaged himself in four substantial field studies of Mongolian (Buryat and Darkhad), Gold (Nanai), Ostyak-Samoyed, Soyot, and Tungus religious practices and beliefs between 1957 and 1964 (see Mircea Eliade’s, 1970, appreciation of his work), and summarized his collection on the soul concept of the studied Inner Asian and Siberian cultures:

These people believe that man is composed from body and soul. However, the soul is not unitary but tripartite... The three components of the human soul are 1. ‘true’ soul, 2. ‘transferring’ soul, 3. ‘external’ soul. These souls are personifications of different human functions. The first one is mental, the second is biological, and the third one is the wandering free soul. The third soul may leave the body due to fear. The body gets motionless, soporose... The first soul frequently leaves the body. This is when dream journeying happens, or when the first soul possesses the body of other humans or animals. Trance states, hallucinations, and suggestions are explained with it. However, it is a lethal danger if the second soul leaves the body, since this soul is the ‘vital force’. The second soul returns to the Mother Spirit, to the distributor of souls, who gives it to a newborn, and the previous man is gone. There are souls that do not unite with humans and remain in free form jumping from one body to the other, wandering whenever they want. (Diószegi, 1998, pp. 26–7, translated by first author)

In some Mongolian groups, e.g. the Darkhad, one soul comes from the maternal side (this soul governs flesh and blood), the second is a bone soul from the paternal side, and the third soul originates from the Spirit World. Two of these souls are mortal, but one is immortal. The ‘flesh and blood soul’ is located in the muscles and migrates to the heart at the time of death. When the heart stops, this soul vanishes. The bone soul is also mortal, it resides in the skeleton too, moving through skeleton bones. Its final location is in the pelvic bones, and it disappears when all the pelvic bones have decayed. The third one, the immortal soul, transmigrates from the Spirit World to a fetus in the womb. Sometimes, because of fear or fright, this soul leaves the body. After death, it stays for a short while in the body. Then later, seeing the light, it moves back to the Spirit World and, eventually, transmigrates into another baby (Purev, 2004).

Another Mongol group, the Khalkhas, also believe that humans and other living beings have three souls, which are called *maxnii süns* (lit. ‘soul of flesh’), *yasnii süns* (lit. ‘soul of bones’), and *süld*. The first of these allegedly reside in the tissues of the human body until its death and dies only after the complete decomposition of the corpse; the second resides in the skeleton until the pelvic bone of the deceased decays; and the third has the whole body of a person or animal as its receptacle and disappears at the moment of his death (Birtalan, 2001; Elbikova, 2019).

There is a diversity of mythological beliefs regarding souls and the associated ritual practices even among closely related Mongolian ethnic groups because they underwent variable changes due to socio-economic transformations and external cultural influences. Mongolian shamanic traditions were eradicated by Buddhism, and even the subsequent syncretic folk religion long practised in Mongolia underwent dynamic modernization changes (Balogh, 2008). Pre-historical, historical, and borrowed ideas have coexisted for centuries. Consequently, ethnographers are faced with inconsistent reports on the meaning of the same term, which respondents explain with different metaphors and variable attributes.

The picture is further complicated by the parallel existence of Mongolian shamanistic traditions (emic expressions: *böö mörgöl* or *böögiin shashin*, male *böö* and female *udgan*) and syncretic folk religion that continue today, albeit with different emphases (*ibid.*). *Böö mörgöl* practices predate Buddhistic influences, based in soul beliefs, the cult of ancestors, and the practitioner entering ASCs. But the everyday practice of syncretic folk religion doesn’t involve ASCs,

and although linked to shamanistic and Buddhist practices, is distinct from them.

Social changes from kinship-based hunting communities towards hierarchical (and mostly Buddhist) pastoral societies made shamanism tangential to most Mongol societies (Pedersen, 2015). But Buddhism never gained any substantial foothold in Western Buryat society (Humphrey and Onon, 1996). Buryat Mongols were distant from the centres of power and consequently preserved numerous features of their hunting way of life until recently. Consequently, their beliefs presumably maintained more pure and traditional forms. Here we have focused on common concepts regarding soul types and avoided addressing the complexity of the souls associated more exclusively with shamanic traditions.

3.1. *The Buryat triad of amin, sülde, and sünesün*

The Buryats have the following beliefs in triplicity of the internal and inherent properties of the person: *amin*, *hülde*, and *hünehen* — dialects used by Birtalan (2001; 2019).

The aspect referred to as *amin* (also *amin süns*), meaning ‘life-force’, is believed related to the ability to breathe. It enlivens the body and resides in the bones and aortic blood. During an illness the *amin* may temporarily be displaced, but it does not leave permanently until death when the *amin* leaves the body with the last breath, but may hang around the corpse to protect it before finally ascending to the Upper World in the form of a bird. Buryat people believe the *amin* can turn into a piece of bone or fabric (felt).

Another aspect of the person, referred to as *hülde* (also *sülde* or *sür sülde*), protects the living person and decides her or his fate. Its meaning is the ‘spirit’ of a person and is commonly conceptualized as one’s protective ‘genius’ (Bawden, 1962), and the charisma of warriors. According to the Bayandun Buryats, *sür sülde* expresses the details of person’s dimensions and physique and is visibly present in a person — exemplified in facial expressions reflecting the person’s mood. Swancutt (2012, p. 112) offers the translation of *sür sülde* as ‘countenance’, in reference to the physical and emotive qualities expressed in the face. Consequently, its loss results in physical and behavioural effects such as a downcast demeanour, drooping facial expressions, a silent and sad manner. This loss leads to problems in a person’s health and everything related to their life, a decline in one’s capacity to work. The loss of one’s *sülde* is apparent to others in the

person's behaviour because, without it, people weep, have bad experiences, or lack success in life. However, such spirit loss is normally only temporary, a transient alteration of mood until the lost spirit returns to the person. Among the Buryats it is the *sülde* with some part of the person's *sünesün* (see below) which is central to one's 'overall health, their state of mind, and their ability and will to pursue their interests' (*ibid.*, p. 111). The *sülde* is the most individualized of the soul aspects. It shapes personality, and resides in a physical body only once. *Sülde* takes its residence in the Middle World after death.

Hünehen (also *sünesün*) is the immortal aspect of the person, that is not dependent on the material body of a single person, but which nonetheless is considered as a spiritual replica of the body. It can leave the body during life (especially during dreaming) through the nose or mouth, can wander away, and shapeshift, even taking the form of certain animals (bee, wasp, or bird). Sometimes *sünesün* wanders as far as the Lower World, which may require a shaman to negotiate for its return. If the *sünesün* is injured or dislocated from the body, this causes extreme harm for the person (Bawden, 1962). Due to fear, sneezing, or even laughing, the *sünesün* may fall out of the body or even be taken away or eaten by evil spirits. This soul's loss has immediate consequences, and results in an overall decline in health that leads to death if the soul does not return on its own or is not recovered through ritual (Swancutt, 2012, pp. 113). After death by violence, the *sünesün* aspect may turn into an evil spirit. Like *sülde*, *sünesün* also contributes to personality formation, as being responsible for self-awareness, mental capacities, and carrying a certain amount of identity. This soul is believed to reside in the blood or the heart, lungs, and liver and migrates through the body across the day and month (Sárközi, 2008). The *sünesün* is also the shaman's 'free soul' which abandons the practitioner's body to allow its place to be taken by the invoked spirit to be in control.

Apparently, the soul concepts of the Darkhad and Khalkha tradition have commonality with the Buryat beliefs with regards to triplicity, whereas one may notice substantial intracultural differences between them. Outstanding is the former's lack of connection to mind or personality. Results of ethnographical studies are dependent on many variables, most importantly on influence by the number of available sources and the method of data collection. The presented analysis of the Buryats is based on information collected in field studies from the 'carriers of the tradition' (Birtalan, 2001), while the others are based on scarce, indirect linguistic analysis of ritual texts. The assumption of

the ‘bone soul’ and ‘flesh soul’ is not unique to the Darkhads and Khalkhas (see examples in the review of Trnka and Lorencova, 2022), but a transcultural context provides more significant validation for the Buryat soul structure (see in Table 1).

4. The Archetypal Neuro-epistemology of Souls

Eliade (1964) presented trance induction as central in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, referring to ecstasy with the ancient Greek meaning ‘to stand outside of oneself’, which he considered a defining characteristic of shamanism. The solid cross-cultural manifestations of this iconic experience must reflect common innate structures. These innate structures provide a neurognostic foundation for understanding the experiences that also are at the basis of the personal experiences of the soul and spirit, exemplified in the separation of the experiential body and personal self-identity from the physical body. Erwin Rohde saw this experience as the source of belief in the multiplicity of the soul, rather than ‘the phenomena of sensation, will, perception, or thought in waking and conscious man which led to this conclusion’ (Rohde, 1925, pp. 6–7). The experience of different souls can be regarded as disarticulation of the normally integrated phenomenology of self-awareness, self-agency, bodily-kinaesthetic sensations, and interpersonal intelligence as components of the modularly structured ‘consciousness’ (Winkelman, 2019).

5. Soul, Spirit, Mind, and Consciousness

I cannot understand what *mind* is, or how it differs from *soul* or *spirit*. They all seem one to me. (St Teresa of Avila, cited in Happold, 1970, p. 352)

This quotation illustrates that mystics note close similarities between mental consciousness and spiritual experiences. While mental and spiritual distinctions have substantially different meanings and attributes across religions and philosophies (Daniels, 2002), the variance is less among Indigenous belief systems where souls principally carry mental, emotional, or social attributes (Freckska, Moro and Wesselman, 2011).

There are historical changes in the meaning of the soul leading to distinctive concepts of consciousness reflecting developments in self-awareness and understanding of human essence. According to Julian Jaynes (1993), in the era when the Iliad and the Old Testament were

written (ca. 1000–800 BCE) people were not fully self-reflective. Instead of planning, making decisions, and thinking proactively, they followed inner spiritual voices originating from one chamber of the ‘bicameral’ mind. Jaynes suggested that self-aware consciousness and proactive mindfulness only became common after the era of Homer (ca. seventh century BCE). This development is not uniform across cultures, with many pre-modern (and even post-modern) people still interpreting their unconscious cognitive and emotional dynamics in spiritual terms. Jaynes’s assumption corresponds to Ken Wilber’s (1996) thesis that traces evolutionary changes in consciousness from the experienced animistic participation in nature observed in pre-civilizational, foraging humans to the existential authority and trans-personal identity characteristic in cultures based on domestication and social stratification.

It is tempting to map the multiple facets of the complex meanings of ‘consciousness’ (Winkelman, 2005) onto the Mongolian soul types, for example: *amin* — related to embodiment (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 2017), ground of self-reference; *sülde* — all that belongs to personality (ego consciousness, attention-awareness, self-reference, phenomenal experiences, decision making, action-behaviour); *sünesün* — transpersonality, transcendent cognition, collective unconscious, higher self. However, the question remains: can an historical concept be applied to the mindset of every pre-modern culture?

We also need to emphasize that terms such as ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, or ‘mind’ may not always carry the same meaning even in contemporary Western thinking. For this reason, until this section of the essay, we tried to narrow down the used terminology mostly to the ‘soul’, staying as close to the emic approach as possible.

6. Beyond Mind–Body Dualism

Psychology comes from the Greek word *psyche*, meaning ‘life force,’ ‘breath,’ ‘mind,’ ‘spirit or soul,’ all of which are immersed in spiritual implications. (Katz, 2017, p. 50)

This undifferentiated pluralism hidden in Western thought is unfolded and detailed in the Mongolian beliefs about multiple souls. This essay illustrates that this plurality of Mongolian soul concepts resembles cross-cultural patterns, suggesting they are not arbitrary cultural constructs, but reflective of neurognostic principles. Similar beliefs found in Indigenous cultures worldwide supports the notion that soul

plurality, specifically tripartite distinctions, reflects transcendent neurognostic principles analogous to archetypal constructs.

Western philosophy and depth psychology propose each person has only one soul that carries personal identity. In contrast, according to Indigenous beliefs, a person's totality is not carried by any single 'soul', but is the amalgamation of several soul-aspects. This 'soul pluralism' perspective transcends Western mind-body dualism. The two traditions seem irreconcilable unless all of the components of the 'soul cluster' can become accommodated and integrated into modern psychological theory — as attempted in the transpersonal school (the 'fourth force') of psychology (Valle, 1989). We think that an integration of Indigenous concepts with Western terminology may provide a better understanding of the essence of a person.

7. Conclusions

The tripartite composite soul concept found cross-culturally indicates it is a *noumena*, and suggests that the singularities defined as 'self' and soul by Western depth psychology are better understood as a cluster or amalgam of what are in fact distinct capacities and forms of consciousness. Jungian and transpersonal psychology intuitively understands this in the concept of archetypes that go beyond the classic Western concepts of the aspects of the 'self'. Indigenous wisdom traditions reveal different aspects and combinations of 'soul clusters' that can be accounted for as elements of a dynamically functioning *extended self*. In this model, soul forms can act both independently and in different roles according to their special attributes, analogous to the unconscious and independent functioning of the innate intelligences.

If the various soul-aspects involve psychosomato-dynamic processes such as innate intelligences (Gardner, 2011), unconscious complexes, forms of self, and archetypal structures, Western traditions may be able to expand conceptualizations of conscious structures with diverse soul concepts representing these largely unconscious, hidden psychological constructs, operators, and functions. Techniques inducing ASCs are important tools in such studies since the multiplicity of the human soul is not an idea derived from sheer speculation but an experience emerging from special forms of self-awareness involving access to the innate structures of consciousness.

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