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## FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF V. DIÓSZEGI IN MONGOLIA, 2022

The article is dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Hungarian ethnologist Vilmos Diószegi (1923–1972), prominent researcher of Siberian shamanic folklore. In 2022, the author and two of his Hungarian colleagues (István Sántha and Zsolt Szilágyi) conducted fieldwork among the Khotogoid people of Northern Mongolia (Khöwsgöl). Diószegi visited Mongolia in 1960 and conducted fieldwork among the Buriad, Khamnigan, Uriankhai, Darkhad, Tofa and Khotogoid. The article discusses the political and cultural context of Diószegi's fieldwork in Mongolia and the changes that occurred since the collapse of the Soviet system in 1990.

**Key words:** shamanic folklore, Southern Siberia, Northern Mongolia, Khotogoid, Darkhad, Tuva, interethnic, fieldwork.

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On July 22, 2022 we commemorated the 50th anniversary of our late colleague, Vilmos Diószegi's (1923–1972) passing away. He was the founder of the department of ethnology (1967) at our institute, a renowned ethnologist who conducted fieldwork on shamanic traditions of Southern Siberia and Northern Mongolia between 1957 and 1964. He died at the age of 49 and most of his fieldwork materials remained unpublished.

We decided to commemorate his anniversary by visiting some places in Mongolia related to his fieldwork in 1960. In 2022 three senior researchers of the Institute of Ethnology (István Sántha, Zsolt Szilágyi and the author) conducted fieldwork in the Khöwsgöl Region — where Diószegi also conducted his research — collecting data for the upcoming publication of Vilmos Diószegi's 1960 Mongolian fieldwork diary.<sup>1</sup>

Diószegi was the student of Lajos Ligeti (1902–1987), the world-famous scholar of Altaic (Mongolic, Turkic and Tungusic) and Tibetan studies who founded the Department of Inner Asian Studies of ELTE University (Budapest) in 1940. Diószegi studied Tungusic Philology at the department between 1940 and 1944 and also worked at the department until 1947 [Hoppál, 1998. P. vii–viii]. Later he started to work at the Museum of Ethnography where he managed the Asian Collection. His major focus was on the Tungusic (Nanai, Ulcha and Uilta) collection by Benedek Baráthosi Balogh (1870–1945) from Amur and Sakhalin regions (1908–1914) and he started to study the shamanic traditions of Northern Eurasia (Inner Asia and Siberia) [Diószegi, 1968a, 1972].

In 1955/56 B. Rinchen (1905–1977) the famous Mongolian writer and scholar defended his D. Sc. degree at the department of Inner Asian Studies and invited Hungarian scholars to Mongolia including Vilmos Diószegi. The first expedition of Hungarian scholars visited Mongolia in 1957 and its members were György Kara, Katalin Kóhalmi and András Róna-Tas [Teleki, 2018]. Diószegi went to the Soviet Union because he wanted to visit the

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<sup>1</sup> The first part of his diaries from 1957 and 1958 have been published already [Diószegi, 2002].

Amur region. But he could only conduct fieldwork among the Mongolic and Turkic peoples (Buriad, Khakas, Tuva and Tofa-Tsaatan) of Southern Siberia along the border of Mongolia (1957–58).<sup>2</sup>

From that point on his attention turned to the shamanic traditions of Northern Mongolia. He was interested in the interethnic relations of the local ethnic groups (Buriad and Khamnigan [Diószegi 1967, 1968a], Darkhad and Uriankhai [Diószegi 1963], Tuva and Tofa-Tsaatan).

### A Short description of Diószegi's trip to Mongolia in 1960

By Rinchen's invitation Diószegi arrived in 1960 to Ulaanbaatar via Irkutsk by plane. Unfortunately, that time Rinchen was under investigation for his "nationalistic" views by the communist party. Diószegi had to find others to help him visit regions of Mongolia where shamanic traditions had been preserved. He stayed in Mongolia for more than two months (between May and August) [Diószegi, 1960. P. 195–205], but managed to organize fieldtrips to only three regions:

1) Khor-Buriads and Khamnigans in Dornod Region<sup>3</sup> (Bayanuul, Bayandun and Dashbalbar districts) between May 19 and 23 (five days);

2) Arig-Uriankhai in East Khövsgöl Region (Chandmani-Öндөр, Tsagaan-Üür districts) between June 1 and 7 (seven days);

3) Darkhad and Toha-Tsaatan (also called Uigur and Uriankhai by Diószegi) in West Khövsgöl (Ulaan-Uul, Richenlhümbe, Tsagaan-Nuur districts) between June 21 and July 8 (19 days).

Diószegi was accompanied by the Mongol ethnologist S. Badamkhatan (1933–1998)<sup>4</sup> to the first

<sup>2</sup> Diószegi wrote a book about his fieldwork between 1957 and 1958 in Southern Siberia [Diószegi, 1968b].

He also published several articles related to his fieldwork [Diószegi, 1962a, 1962b, 1970a, 1970b].

The author published materials related to Diószegi's fieldwork [Somfai Kara, 2008, 2012, 2017, 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Buyangerel did fieldwork among the Khor-Buriad and wrote a book about his fieldwork where she mentioned Shemed *abgai* famous lady shaman (*udgan*) [Buyangerel, 2013]. Hungarian Mongol philologist Balogh Mátyás also worked with the famous neo-shaman Seren baabai [Balogh, 2007. P. 114].

<sup>4</sup> Although S. Badamkhatan wrote articles about the Darkhad and Tofa-Tsaatan of Western Khövsgöl he never agreed to take Diószegi to his region of fieldwork [Badamkhatan, 1962, 1965].

two expeditions but there was tension between the two scholars and those fieldworks did not last more than a week [Hangartner, 2010. P. 57–59]. Finally Diószegi travelled without him to the Western side of Lake Khövsgöl where he managed to conduct fieldwork for almost three weeks. He was accompanied by a student of Russian philology, Dawaa. In Ulaan-Uul district he met a local Darkhad teacher O. Pürev (1931–2010), who inspired by Diószegi later became an ethnologist conducting research on Darkhad shamanic traditions [Pürev, 2003]. Diószegi and O. Pürev visited several shamanic shrines (*asar ongon*) in the local forest and took pictures of them.<sup>5</sup>

Diószegi had great difficulties collecting shamanic folklore from shamans during his fieldwork because he was usually accompanied by local officials who were ideologically opposed to the traditional spirituality (shamanism). Shamans refused to perform rituals and Diószegi could record only few shamanic texts from them. But he managed to record shamanic songs from the Darkhad *jaarin* J. Damdin<sup>6</sup> in Mörön and the Khotogoid *jaarin* T. Nanjad.<sup>7</sup>

Damdin *jaarin* was the most famous shaman among the Darkhads and because he refused to cooperate with the communist authorities they put him in the Mörön jail. Diószegi heard about the imprisoned shaman when he travelled through

<sup>5</sup> Gábor Wilhelm published some pictures of *asar ongon* in an album related to the shamanic paraphernalia obtained by Vilmos Diószegi during his fieldwork in Mongolia [Wilhelm, 1999. P. 24–25].

<sup>6</sup> Diószegi only mentioned J. Damdin in a footnote among other Darkhad shamans (*jairan*) as his most prominent informant [Diószegi, 1961. P. 198].

He also mentioned Damdin in his article about Darkhad shamanism saying that J. Damdin draw a picture of his horse-headed shamanic staff (*morin tolgaitai tayag*), which probably was and influence by the Buraid of East Khövsgöl [Diószegi, 1963. P. 57].

Birtalan mentions Damdin as the ongon "sacred" spirit of a deceased shaman [Birtalan, 2004. P. 44].

<sup>7</sup> Diószegi wrote that after his fieldwork in West Khövsgöl he went back to Ulaanbaatar and collected material among the Khotogoid living around the capital. He mentioned the name of T. Nanjad only in a footnote as one of the Khotogoid shamans [Diószegi, 1961. P. 200].

I have found T. Nanjad's recordings (22 shamanic songs) and his pictures in the archive of the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest [Somfai Kara, 2017. P. 25].



Fig. 1. Vilmos Diószegi and O. Pürev in Ulaan-Uul, Khövsgöl Region (July, 1960)



Fig. 2. Vilmos Diószegi with the Darkhad *jaarin* J. Damdin in front of the prison in Mörön (Khövsgöl Region, 1960, June 7)

Mörön during his second fieldtrip to the Uriankhai. On the way back Diószegi was given permission to meet and record Damdin in the Mörön prison (June 7). He also took his pictures of him outside the prison.

The other famous informant recorded by Diószegi was the Khotogoid *jaarin* T. Nanjad who according to Diószegi's letters to his wife Judit Morvay (1923–2002), lived not far from Ulaanbaatar. After the failures of Diószegi's fieldwork B. Rinchen found some time to take him to the Khotogoid *jaarin's* camp on July 15 or 16. Nanjad moved away from his homeland in Tosoncengel, Khövsgöl for political reasons to the vicinity of Ulaanbaatar (Töv Region). They took a

picture of him and his wife in front of Nanjad's felt house (*esgii ger*) with B. Rinchen [Hoppál, 1998. P. xxvii]. Diószegi managed to record more than twenty shamanic songs from Nanjad *jaarin*.

After our arrival in July, 2022 to Ulaanbaatar we made presentations in Mongol (Somfai Kara, Szilágyi) and Russian (Sántha) at the Institute of History and Ethnography of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences about Vilmos Diószegi's fieldwork in Mongolia (1960). My presentation was about the Diószegi's fieldwork conditions, its historical and cultural context.

#### I) Diószegi's Fieldwork condition

1) 1 or 2 weeks (max 3 weeks) fieldtrips on location



Fig. 3. B. Rinchen with Vilmos Diószegi visiting the Khotogoid *jaarin* T. Nanjad in Töv Region (1960, July 15)

2) Knowledge of Russian (communicating through interpreters)

3) Accompanied by interpreters and local scholars

4) Usually under KGB surveillance

5) Never seen a proper shamanic ritual

6) Political situation: Communist Ideology, Atheism

7) Shamans and other people “pretending”

Despite staying in Mongolia for almost three months Diószegi could only organize short fieldtrips to three locations to various ethnic minorities of Northern Mongolia (Buriad, Uriankhai, Darkhad and Tofa-Tsaatan). His lack of knowledge of Mongol forced him to communicate through interpreters in Russian. Due to the political situation (ideology) surveillance of the local KGB also prevented him to experience a real shamanic ritual and forced the shamans and other people to engage in “pretending” that shamanic traditions were ignored. Diószegi managed to record reliable data in two situations where he could avoid “pretending”:

1) In the prison where the J. Damdin shaman had nothing to lose or hide.

2) In the case of T. Nanjad who was in exile and thus avoiding the surveillance of the local officials.

## II) Cultural and Historical Context

1) Regional varieties and no ethnic boundaries  
Inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations (Tuva-Uriankhai and Darkhad, Buriad and Khamigan)

2) Cultural and Political changes (1990)

3) Pretending and Neo-shamanism

4) The “Missing Link” in the history of Shamanic Folklore (Diary)

5) Taking Diószegi’s materials back to the source community (Diary and Pictures)

But even with the limited information he managed to obtain, Diószegi realized that shamanic traditions in Mongolia were not homogeneous and these were not ethnic but regional varieties (Buriad-Khamnigan and Darkhad-Uriankhai) due to inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations. He wrote several articles about these ethnic considerations and how shamanic traditions can be used to map ethnic processes of Southern Siberia and Northern Mongolia.

The democratic changes after 1990 led to era of neo-shamanism where traditional shamanism observed by Diószegi transformed into post-modern cultural phenomena. Shamans went through urbanization and modernization which led to a new form of “pretending”. Neo-shamans “pretend” the rituals of traditional shamans while



many taboos and limitations are being ignored to popularize shamanic activity among the urban population of Mongolia and even international audiences [Somfai Kara, 2017. P. 23]. Due to these changes we can conclude that Diószegi's material can be considered as the "missing link" between the pre-soviet times (1924) and the post-soviet period (1990) [Hangartner, 2010. P. 257].

Finally we have to take Diószegi's materials to the source communities who can provide a lot of additional information to put them into the proper cultural and historical context. In addition, in Ulaanbaatar we met the director of the institute hosting us (C. Batbayar), with whom we discussed future cooperation (historical and scientific background of Vilmos Diószegi's fieldwork). We also met the director of the Institute of Language and Literature (J. Bat-Ireedüi), with whom we also discussed cooperation (Mongolian epic tradition and shamanic folklore). Later we took part in a spirit-evoking and healing ceremony of a Darkhad urban shaman in the suburbs of Ulaanbaatar.

### Related Fieldwork

From Ulaanbaatar we travelled to Khövsgöl County (700 km northwest of Ulaanbaatar). We visited the regional center Mörön, where we interviewed elderly local informants from members of the local minorities (Khotogoid, Darkhad, Buriad). We mainly asked them about the religious and cultural conditions of the 1960s.

We learned a lot about Diószegi's informant, J. Damdin *jaarin* (shaman) of the Darkhad who was in detention at the Mörön prison. We determined the exact location of the prison and met people who saw him during his serving time at Mörön, the regional center of Khövsgöl. Damdin apparently ended up in the prison because he refused to stop his shamanic activity despite the warnings of the local authorities. Interviewing him during his detention actually help the shaman to avoid further "pretending" and could provide important information about Darkhad shamanic traditions.

We met Khotogoid shamans who are still active today, from whom we inquired important information about their shamanic traditions. Nobody from the local Khotogoid population has

ever heard of Nanjad or his shamanic activity. Later in Ulaanbaatar we met another young Khotogoid shaman. He heard about Nanjad from his master who initiated him to the shamanic activity. According to his master, Nanjad had to flee from his homeland in Khövsgöl and settled down near Ulaanbaatar where nobody knew him as a shaman and he could lead a peaceful life. The question is: how did Rinchen *bagshi* find him and have the chance to take Diószegi to his home to record shamanic songs while he was under investigation himself for nationalism?

But unfortunately after his return from his second fieldtrip fieldwork to Khövsgöl the last couple of days of Diószegi's is missing from his diary and letters. Magdolna Tatár apparently conducted research on J. Nanjad and wrote a PhD dissertation in Norway but she could not defend it and it was never published.<sup>8</sup> So the story of Nanjad *jaarin* remains a mystery. Most likely Rinchen and Diószegi visited him in secret so that they could record his shamanic songs without the interference of the local authorities.

Khotogoid shamans just like other shamans of the Altai-Sayan region were initiated by receiving shamanic devices like jewsharp (*khuur*), drum (*khenggerereg*) and sometimes by a staff (*tayag*). But modern Khotogoid shamans are also going through a cultural transformation. Old-style Khotogoid shamans like Nanjad are gone and most of them are so-called revitalized 'modern' shamans who by ignoring restrictions of clan spirits shamanic traditions are mixing and spreading between various ethnic groups (Khalkha, Buriad, Oirat).

### III) Continuous but changing shamanic folklore

1) Old-style shamans: hiding and suspicious shamans living in poverty working inside one clan. Traditionally the ancestor spirit (*ug*) of a clan (*obog*) was responsible for someone to become a shaman (*ugtai*) in most cases.

2) Revitalized or 'modern' shamans who take their shamanic rituals to other clans and villages if requested. By ignoring restriction shamans can initiate unlimited number of disciples who

<sup>8</sup> She published another article about shamans from Mongolia but Nanjad was not mentioned there [Tatár, 2006].

can work for various clans as well as other ethnic groups, e. g. Khalkha majority. Modern shamans use shamanic tradition to strengthen their ethnic identity, thus they do not limit their activity to their own clan [Shimamura, 2014].

3) Shamans performing for tourists and western anthropologists.

During our field we also met an old Khotogoid epic singer who was a master of *khai* singing in the Western Mongolian (Uriankhai) tradition. The *khai* singing style is practiced among the Turkic Altai-Telengit, Khakas (Yenisei Kyrgys) and Tuva-Tofa, as well as the Mongolic Uriankhai (assimilated Tuva-Tofa). The *khai* epic singing style spreading to other ethnic groups (Khalkha or Khotogoid) is quite a new phenomenon.

We visited a Khotogoid nomadic summer lodge (*juslang*) in the Tosoncengel area, where we also collected information from an elderly informant. During our visit to the Khotogoid nomadic camp we were informed that shamanic traditions were totally absent among them. Even the oldest

generation growing up 1950s — when Diószegi started his fieldwork — did not experience any shamanic activity.

We could only conclude that probably T. Nanjad was one of the last shamans of the Khotogoid who himself was forced out of his community. Modern Khotogoid shamanic activity was a revitalization of the tradition disrupted during the communist times [Shimamura, 2004]. That is why Diószegi's material (recording and pictures) could be a useful tool for modern shamans to revitalize their traditions.

We also collected from a local Buriad lama and visited the buildings of the Khüree (Buddhist monastery) in Mörön as well as Mörön's city museum which has a rich collection of shamanic objects. We finally went to the Bulgan Regional Museum that Diószegi also visited. We would like to thank all our colleagues from Mongolia who helped our work especially M. Enkhebaatar from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences who comes from Mörön.

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## ПО СТОПАМ В. ДИОСЕГИ В МОНГОЛИИ В 2022 ГОДУ

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Статья посвящена 50-летию со дня смерти выдающегося исследователя сибирского шаманского фольклора венгерского этнолога Вильмоша Диосеги (1923–1972). В 2022 г. автор и двое его венгерских коллег (Иштван Шанта и Жольт Силадьи) провели полевые исследования среди хотогойтов Северной Монголии (Хувсгел). Диосеги посетил Монголию в 1960 г. и провел полевые исследования среди бурят, хамниган, урянхайцев, дархатов, тофаларов и хотогойтов. В статье рассматриваются политический и культурный контекст проведенных Диосеги полевых исследований в Монголии и изменения, произошедшие после распада советской системы в 1990 г.

Ключевые слова: шаманский фольклор, Южная Сибирь, Северная Монголия, хотогойты, дархаты, Тува, межэтнический, полевые исследования.

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