Uncomfortable Anthropology:
An Enquiry into Violence and Shamanism in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
Formulae on Plagiarism

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Sincerely,

Arabella Ciampi
Abstract

This thesis explores an experience of uncomfortable anthropological research in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. The research itself was initiated by an interest in violence and shamanism, topics that will run throughout the entirety of the thesis. Research is identified and examined as uncomfortable in relation to the field experience and the cultural setting. Firstly, I will discuss my personal discomfort in the field, in order to give anthropological validity to feelings and emotions experienced by the anthropologist while in the field. Secondly, I will consider the theoretical uncertainty experienced in relation to the topic of violence. Thirdly, I will discuss the discomfort experienced by my informants in relation to the topic of shamanism. Throughout the thesis the discomfort felt by the anthropologist will be juxtaposed to the uncertainty experienced by my informants with regards to my research topic. Through a discussion of uncertainty, I hope to show how uncertainty is constructive, for the practice of anthropology as well as in the practice of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar.
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Note on Translation of Mongolian Terms

There are different systems for the translation of Mongolian into English, none of which provide an accepted norm (Pedersen 2011). Mongolian is nowadays written utilizing the Cyrillic alphabet. As I do not quote any Mongolian phrases and make use of only a handful of terms, I will translate these by using the approximate English sound of Cyrillic letters. This is the way in which my translators translated the terms for me, and the way I was taught to translate Mongolian by my Mongolian language teacher. Hence all translations of Mongolian terms are to be taken as my own.
Introduction

The research and arguments presented here are the result of a useless question. A useless question which, when I left for fieldwork, was at the core of my ethnographic enquiry. Most anthropologists would say that it is perfectly normal to start with a useless question, as long as that question changes and the focus of one’s research develops from the time one enters the field. What if this does not happen? Does that make an anthropological enquiry invalid? And what if to this useless question we were to add a truthful account of how difficult fieldwork can be, and say that in the end these difficulties were not resolved? Would this invalidate the whole data gathering process and subsequent conclusions given to the initial useless question?

What anthropologists, and especially students of anthropology, receive is the final product of polished researches. Of course there are often discussions – sometimes an even quite rich discussions – on the trials and tribulation of the fieldwork experience. However, these almost always end with the anthropologist finding their way through their misfortunes and/or ordeals, becoming friends with their informants (albeit not with all), returning from the field and developing their interest into one that better fits the reality of their experience. So we the readers and students of anthropology are led to believe that problems do arise during fieldwork, but that ‘good’ anthropologists will be able to overcome them. I was not able to overcome mine. A difficult field experience enabled me to understand that not all difficulties pertaining to fieldwork are meant to, or can be, overcome – the point lies in understanding them.

The same goes for the useless question. ‘Good’ anthropologists are expected to change the course of their research when they reach a dead end. But what if instead we tried to understand why that dead end was a dead end in the first place? Arguably, we wouldn’t because then we would be researching a topic that did not matter to our informants. I fully agree with that. However, I think that research can also benefit from concentrating on why our initial questions did not work. The benefit in this lies in understanding the underlying assumptions we and other anthropologists before us made, the assumptions that led us to the topic in the first place. Moreover, in explaining why our initial questions did not work, we might uncover what it is that matters to our informants in that ambit instead. Hence looking at why certain questions we pose did not fit the cultural setting is not
only ultimately constructive for the practice of anthropology but also for uncovering what is of cultural importance.

Having said that, let’s introduce the so-called useless question. My research question was this: How does violence inform the practice of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia? Writing the research proposal, I gathered information and anthropological understandings on the concept of violence, shamanism and the context of Mongolia. I had never been there before and I did not speak the language. From an anthropological standpoint, this was a valid research question as it sought to understand if and how violent practices can be said to have a constructive quality to them. Furthermore, violence and shamanism has only recently developed as an area of study in anthropology. I believed the Mongolian context was a well-suited setting for such an enquiry as there has been a recent increase in the number of shamans and their practice had been previously described as involving physical discomfort (Riboli & Torri 2013).

Once I arrived in Mongolia however, it became clear to me that my research question was considered useless in the eyes of my Mongolian interlocutors. It was not of importance to them. Not only that, but the fact that I was interested in such a question cast me as a potentially untrustworthy person. This was coupled with situational difficulties pertaining to the setting and timing of my research, as well as personal feelings of unrest. Uneasiness characterized the totality of my field experience. The research presented here and in the following chapters is a reflection of that. The aim in presenting my uncomfortable experience is three-fold: to show how uncomfortable experiences can have anthropological validity, to discuss why my research question was theoretically invalid in the first place, and to explain what it was about the practice of shamanism which seemed to bother my interlocutors instead of violence.

Anthropology has been previously defined as uncomfortable if fieldwork is carried out in areas of political unrest or war (Nordstrom & Robben 1995). Other examples of difficult field experiences pertain to the choice of topic (Abu-Lughod 1986), or feelings of disconnection with informants and the field environment (Briggs 1970). Hume & Mulcock have gone as far as to argue that feelings of inadequacy and failure are an inevitable part of fieldwork (2004). Although discomfort during fieldwork has been acknowledged, there seemed to be little enquiry into broader issues of

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Violence and shamanism was initially analyzed with regards to the South American context (Taussig 1987, Whitehead 2002, Whitehead & Wright 2004, Fausto 2007), but only recently has this topic gained ground in wider anthropological discourses. The book Shamanism and Violence, edited by Riboli & Torri, was published in 2013. This collection attempts to establish an indisputable link between violence and shamanism.
anthropological importance. For example, does being uncomfortable during fieldwork make for
‘bad’ anthropology? If the fieldworker perceives the totality of the fieldwork experience as
erroneous, can such an experience produce anything theoretically useful? I think this is important to
consider because it is highly unlikely that I am the only one who has experienced this. Besides,
when I came back from fieldwork and began looking into the matter, I found very little guidance to
this question in anthropological books. Fieldwork had indeed been uncomfortable for
anthropologists before me, but their difficulties had eventually been resolved. In my case, however,
the discomfort that I felt was extended throughout my entire experience, and continued when I
returned from the field. I found few examples of other anthropologists that had been uncomfortable
throughout fieldwork, and little guidance on how to theoretically tackle this type of experience.
What I present here is not a theory per se, but an example of how to make uncomfortable
anthropology meaningful.

Reflecting on uncomfortable experiences also leads us to ask interesting questions about the nature
of our work as anthropologists. For example, what kind of data is the ‘right’ type of data? How
should it be acquired? Should our emotions be held accountable for the type of data that we are able
to acquire? A discussion on uncomfortable fieldwork will necessarily take into consideration
questions about methodology. Furthermore, if our methods influence our data, then what is the
effect of this on our theories? Truth be told, I did have a romanticized idea of anthropologists going
to the field and becoming close friends with their informants and acquiring a role in the local
community. I believe that our own ethnographies reinforce this romanticized ideal. Difficult
emotional experiences are seldom considered. If they are, they are contrasted to positive outcomes
of research. I have not encountered any anthropological writing that discusses the theoretical
validity of fieldwork that is perceived to have gone ‘wrong’. This is an attempt to fill that gap. In
what follows I present the historical and socio-religious circumstances of Mongolia and my field
site, Ulaanbaatar. Subsequently, I will present the arguments of the following Chapters in a simple
outline, touching on the key topics I wish to consider for the development of this thesis.

Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar and Conditions of Fieldwork

Most Mongolians, when asked about their nations history, would certainly mention the name and
rule of Chinggis Khan. Chinggis Khan is considered to be the father of the Mongolian nation,
culture, and identity (Kaplonski 2004, Diener & Hagen 2013). In fact, there is no historical
documentation of the time before his empire, which, at its peak, stretched from Eastern Europe to
the Korean peninsula, and from Siberia to the Himalayas; and the territory that we today know as
Mongolia was occupied by nomadic Turkic and Mongol tribes. Chinggis rose to power by uniting
these warring nomadic tribes at the beginning of the 13th century (Weatherford 2004). Through
shrewd military combat and tactics, he succeeded in creating the biggest land empire in history, and
after he died, in 1227, its rule was passed on to his sons and grandsons, who eventually divided this
empire amongst them. The continuous warring between each faction signaled its imminent demise.
Towards the end of the 14th century, Karakorum – the capital of the empire founded by Chinggis
Khan – was seized by the Ming Dynasty (ibid).

Mongolia was subsequently under Chinese rule until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.
After this there followed a short period of independence in which a theocracy was established,
headed by the Bogd Khan. Yet continuous invasions by Chinese warlords prompted the Soviet
Union to intervene in 1921, and with their help, the rule of the Bogd Khan was re-established
(Diener & Hagen 2013). At the same time, this signaled the start of Soviet influence in Mongolia.
Mongolia was never formally under Soviet rule, but it grew into one of its socialist satellite states.
In the same year the Bogd Khan was restored, a communist revolution headed by Choibalsan –
Stalin’s Mongolian counterpart – caused him to withdraw and socialism was established as the
political backdrop of the country. State socialism ended in 1991, as a result of the Mongolian
Democratic Revolution of 1990 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (ibid). Since then Mongolia
has established itself as a democracy.

Mongolians view shamanism as closely linked to the cult of Chinggis Khan. Shamanism is viewed
as a traditional kind of worship and Chinggis Khan as the father of all Mongolian traditions; hence
he is closely associated to shamanism. Some argue that Chinggis was a shaman himself, but
regardless of whether this is true or not, there were shamans around during that time and Chinggis
Khan did rely on their advice during his reign (Kahn 1984). Throughout the Mongolian empire, all
religious beliefs were tolerated. The advent of the Chinese after the fall of Karakorum brought the
spread of Buddhism, which subsequently became the dominant religious belief in Mongolia. In the
17th and 18th centuries, ‘yellow shamanism’ developed, which is a combination of shamanic and
Buddhist elements. After the fall of Chinese authority over the region and with the influence of the
Soviet Union, religious beliefs came to be actively persecuted. Both shamanic and Buddhist
practitioners were oppressed and killed – giving rise to what are now know as the ‘shamanic
purges’ and the demolishing of as many as 800 Buddhist monasteries (Hesse 1987, Diener & Hagen
Many people today believe that because of the Chinese rule and Soviet influence, knowledge about shamanism has been partially lost.

The development of shamanism in Mongolia is interrelated to the political history of the country; indeed anthropologists have paid close attention to the way in which socialism has influenced what shamanism is and represents today (Humphrey 1994b, Pedersen 2011, Buyandelger 2013). During socialist rule, shamans were actively repressed, hence most stopped practicing in fear of being punished, and elders refrained from passing on knowledge of the practice to younger generations (Pedersen 2011, Buyandelger 2013). Anthropologists argue that this proliferation of violence against shamanism has resulted in feelings of uncertainty that pervade the population today (Buyandelger 2007, Pedersen & Hojer 2008), together with what is perceived as culture ‘loss’ (Hojer 2009, Pedersen 2011).

In spite of this, it is claimed both by scholars and individuals I spoke to, that belief in shamanism and the total number of shamans has been rapidly increasing since the fall of the state socialism (Merli 2006, Hangartner 2011). There are different theories as to why this is the case: Humphrey argues that it is because shamanism becomes more powerful when the state is not (1994b), Hangartner argues that it is because shamans are discursively constructed as socially and geographically marginal, and this marginality is seen as a source of power (2011); while others argue that the increase is due to the fact that shamanism is nowadays allowed more visibility and shamans do not have to conceal themselves any longer (Merli 2006, Balzer 1999). Therefore, although both shamans and scholars recognize that knowledge on shamanism has been damaged because of Mongolia’s historical past, the country is currently experiencing an upsurge in the number of shamanic practitioners and believers.

A discussion on shamanism necessitates a definition of what I mean by ‘shamanism’. Anthropologists have argued that shamanism is a category of understanding created by Western scholars to better comprehend spiritual practices not akin to their own (Taussig 1987). In the context of Mongolia, Bumochir argues that what is today understood as ‘shamanism’ has been constructed by a combination of Soviet, Mongolian, and subsequently Western, scholars (2014b). He argues that Mongolian shamans themselves were also interested in promoting ‘Mongolian shamanism’, in an attempt to, since the 18th century, institutionalize the practice. In fact, however, the blanket term ‘Mongolian shamanism’ refers to a practice that is made up of different ethnic traditions (ibid). It is not an entity that is to be looked at as homogenous, but as one that will differ
according to the ethnic origins of the shaman. In Mongolia there are 4 major ethnic groups: the Khalkha, the Buryat, the Darhad and the Uriankhai; and they all have their own types of shamans. It is the Mongolian identity of the shamans themselves that make the totality of these practices known as ‘Mongolian shamanism’ (Balogh 2010). In Ulaanbaatar, the majority are Khalkha shamans. During my stay, I spoke to 11 different shamans, 10 Khalkha and 1 Buryat. Therefore, when I speak of shamanism in this thesis it will be in relation to Khalkha shamanism.

Shamanism in Mongolia is not considered a religion, but a worship. The Mongolian word for shamanism is *boo morgol*, which means shamanic belief. For my informants, this belief came from a worship of their spirits. It is considered a practice endemic to the Mongolian lifestyle, not a religion. The only time ‘shamanism’ is referred to as a religion, *boo shashin*, is when the practice is likened to other religions, for comparative reasons. For this reason I will not refer to shamanism as a religion, but rather, as a traditional worship or belief.

As the practice of shamanism is increasing in Mongolia, this is especially the case in Ulaanbaatar, its capital and the cultural, economic, political and religious center of the country (Byambadorj et al. 2011). It is the largest city in Mongolia and hosts almost half of its total population (ibid). In the city, belief in shamanism can go hand in hand with belief in other religions. In other words, an individual can identify as believing in, for example, both shamanism and Buddhism. There are very few statistics on the religious beliefs in Ulaanbaatar, the most current one I found is from 2004: individuals that consider themselves religious are 55% Buddhist, 10% Muslim, 7% Christian, and 3% Shamanists (Sarantuya 2004). Shamanism is Ulaanbaatar is increasingly seen as tied to the work of ‘fake shamans’ – shamans who are either using the wrong spirits or are inventing the practice altogether. Because of this, many Ulaanbaatarians are skeptical about shamanism, and, although they accept that shamanism is part of their traditional way of living, there is a deep-seated worry that shamans cannot be trusted. For this reason, many people I spoke to told me that they did not believe in the work of shamans, but did believe in spirits and ghosts.

My fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar lasted for 3 months, over the summer of 2014. Shamans in Ulaanbaatar can be both male and female; of the 11 shamans I spoke to, 4 were female and 7 were male. The youngest shaman I spoke to was 17, while the oldest was 65 – although of this I am not sure and it would have been rude to ask. I was able to carry out a total of 19 recorded informal interviews in Mongolian, with the help of translators. I also observed 16 rituals: 1 shaman initiation, 1 celebration of the shaman new year, 1 appreciation of the stars, 1 appreciation of fire, 1 animal
sacrifice for celebration, 2 curse removals, and 9 rituals done for general healing, where each individual present could ask the spirits for physical or psychological help.

During my time there I lived with two different families: half my time was spent with the family of my Mongolian teacher, and the other half was spent with the family of a teacher of English. Contacts were made by word of mouth and telephone calls. Ulaanbaatar is an ambiguous and dispersive city. There is a clear juxtaposition between the old and the new: traditional ger houses are next to old Socialist block buildings and new constructions built post-democratic revolution. It is ambiguous because the ‘real’ Mongolian identity is said to be found elsewhere, in more rural environments outside of the city; however, it is also the heart of the country, where important decisions are made and where Mongolians have the majority of opportunities (Kaplonski 2004). Increasingly, the city has seen the development of “urban shamanism”, who some argue should be a type of shamanism and a phenomenon in its own right (Humphrey 1999, Balogh 2010). It is argued that since 1991, shamanism has developed in the form of associations and shaman centers (Merli 2006, Balogh 2010). In the time I was there, I was able to ascertain the existence of two shaman associations, but not more. These were the ‘Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans’ and the ‘Center of Shaman and Eternal Heavenly Sophistication’. These associations attempt to homogenize and standardize the practice of shamanism and establish it as the leading belief in Mongolia. It is argued that urban shamanism is more institutionalized than rural shamanism (Humphrey 1999), but in fact my fieldwork points at the opposite. In my experience, the majority of shamans were against shamanic organizations and much more interested in keeping their ethnic traditions alive rather than following guidelines. Of the 11 shamans I spoke to, only 3 were part of an association. Therefore, although it has been argued that there is a trend attempting to institutionalize shamanism in Ulaanbaatar (Merli 2004, Balogh 2010, Bumochir 2014b), I also experienced a contrasting trend, one that attempts to de-institutionalize the practice and render it more personal and subjective.

Similar to that of other urban anthropologists, my experience in an urban setting was affected by an encounter with a multitude of systems of meaning (Hannerz 1980, Ferguson 1999, Pardo & Prato 2012). Indeed it is argued that anthropologists in an urban setting are subjected to particular methodological and theoretical challenges, often associated to the lack of a homogenous whole (Pardo & Prato 2012). The form of shamanism I encountered was made up of contrasting views – even if the majority of the shamans I spoke to were of the same ethnicity, Khalkha. The shamans I spoke to all had slightly different ways of practicing shamanism. Not only did they have different
ways of carrying out rituals, but different ways of talking to the spirits, different types of paraphernalia and different ideas of what shamanism should represent in society. Therefore, shamanism was presented to me as a confusing, heterogeneous practice.

The city environment also made it easier to disengage from my informants. I did not live with shamans, the interviews I conducted and rituals I observed always had to be fixed beforehand, and often required me to travel from one side of the city to the other. This discontinuity, and not being able to be part of a ‘whole’, cast me in a role I was uncomfortable in. It cast me in the role of the foreign researcher who is only present every now and again, but does not have real ties with anyone. There was very little spontaneity involved in my exchanges with shamanism. Besides, theoretically speaking, I was confronted with the problem most urban anthropologists are confronted with: how to present the cultural complexity of cities as coherent systems of meaning. It is argued that one must find systems of meaning that reflect this heterogeneity (Hannerz 1980, Ferguson 1999), which is what I will attempt in Chapter 3.

Outline of Thesis

The reoccurring theme of this thesis is uncertainty; uncertainty experienced by the anthropologist in the field, as well as an uncertainty endemic to the cultural setting. I will explore what happens when the practice of fieldwork becomes uncomfortable, as well as attempt to understand ambivalent positions with regards to the topic of shamanism. The thesis is divided into three types of ‘uncertainties’: personal uncertainty pertaining to my relation with the field, theoretical uncertainty pertaining to my choice of topic, and local uncertainty pertaining to the authenticity of shamanism; Chapters 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Through a discussion of these different types of uncertainty, I hope to show how uncertainty is constructive, both in fieldwork and in shamanism.

My initial interests and research question were based on an understanding of both violence and shamanism in the context of Ulaanbaatar. These will be considered in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. The concept of violence will be questioned for its theoretical validity, and shamanism will be analyzed as a contrasting practice. However, the main aim of this research is to present how anthropology and its theories are constructed. Why do we argue what we argue? By talking openly about my own experience, I hope to show how personal experiences of fieldwork will determine which anthropological stance is taken, which theories are argued for and which arguments are presented.
In Chapter 1 I will explain this relationship more fully. This is a chapter based on the experiential level of fieldwork; where I will explain in detail why fieldwork was so uncomfortable for me, and how it was mainly my own emotional reactions to the field that made the experience so uncertain. Rather than a psychological endeavor, this chapter will highlight what caused my uncomfortable experience, as well as consider the theoretical implications born from such an experience. I will use John Wengle (1988) to discuss how an anthropologists’ experience and emotional turmoil can be examined in terms of how it effects our stance on anthropology and our research topic.

In Chapter 2 I will consider the theoretical meaning and usefulness of the concept of violence. Although my initial interest was to find the meaning of violence in shamanism, I will argue against the presence of ‘violence’ in the sphere of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar. This should be seen as a direct consequence of the uncomfortable experience that I had in the field. My topic was received with skepticism, which cast me in the role of outsider and made me feel uncomfortable. The discomfort I experienced was inherently tied to the rejection of my topic. In this chapter I try to discuss this rejection in the terms used by my informants; in other words, I will explain why it was that they did not see ‘violence’ where I had. Various approaches to violence will be contrasted here, and I will way the pros and cons of defining violence a priori or analyzing the local meaning of what violence means and represents (cf. Whitehead & Wright 2004).

Finally, in Chapter 3 I will consider an aspect of shamanism that was particularly troublesome for my informants: the question of what was good and what was bad. While asking my informants about violence, I realized they would almost always talk about what was good or bad instead. In the eyes of my informants, this ambiguity was worrisome and it provided them with a great deal of discomfort. In this chapter I will analyze these categories and show how they are understood and constructed. The analysis carried out in this chapter will be on the discursive level of meaning. I will use Aijmer & Abbink’s symbological analysis (2000) to explain how the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ acquire significance in the ambit of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar.

As I mentioned earlier, it is not the first time that uncertainty is linked to the Mongolian context. Uncertainty is first and foremost spoken about with regards to the legacy of socialist rule, and the impact this has had on both shamanism and livelihood (Buyandelger 2013, Pedersen & Hojer 2008). However, I propose to look at how uncertainty is lived and experienced, and how it can be a useful condition of fieldwork and being. Ultimately, I will argue that uncertainty is useful,
insightful, and might not be as uncertain as initially thought. With regards to fieldwork, uncertainty is useful because it allows us to ask questions which might otherwise have not even been thought about. It is also insightful as it can lead us to understand how our practice is actively shaped by our own feelings and emotions. Uncertainty tied to the setting we are in, instead, is constructive, as I will argue that uncertainty is created and reinforced by the cultural environment it finds itself in. In a way, then, the uncertainty becomes certain, as well as productive for the social setting.

There is a certain parallel that can be drawn between my informants and me, in that we were both uncomfortable with the topic at hand. I will look at how it was uncomfortable from three different angles: a personal one, a theoretical one, and a discursive one. Together, these show the productive power of uncertainty, not only because uncertainty acquires meaning, but also because uncertainty comes to be seen as a legitimate and advantageous state of being.
The Process of Fieldwork

If I was to pick one word with which to describe my field experience, it would be this: restless. Melodrama aside, not one day went by without me experiencing one or a combination of these sensations: dread, anxiety, frustration and sadness. Exactly halfway through fieldwork in Ulaanbaatar, I wrote this in my field diary:

“This research has really opened my eyes to how little backbone I have, especially when it comes to having my own project and being the ‘boss’. Man up, Bella! As Tsengel says, don’t have a weak mind. I have to stop doubting myself.”

Here I am referring to my emotional self that, I believed, was hindering me in the carrying out of my research. This speaking of self figures extremely little in the rest of my field entries. I thought that ‘good’ anthropologists didn’t dwell on their traits, or negative states of mind for that matter, and that eventually challenges in the field would be overcome. After all, I had been told that the fieldwork experience could be difficult at first. That was to be expected. The majority of novice anthropologists do in fact go through a period of acclimatization with the field (Wengle 1988, Lareau & Shultz 1996, Ferguson 1999, Hume & Mulcock 2004). I thought the key was to become used, or adapt, to my environment; which necessarily required time. I came to the conclusion that in order to ‘man up’ I had to forget about all the disapproving sensations and simply persevere with my research. And while this might very well work in some cases, it did not in mine.

The difficulties I experienced in the field where not resolved. By not resolved I mean that the sensations of dread, anxiety, frustration and sadness which arose from miscommunications and uncertainties at the core of my exchanges with the ‘other’, lasted throughout the entire of my field experience and were, if anything, exacerbated by the time I came back. This is not to say that there were no moments of enjoyment, but these were few and far between, and did not overshadow the overriding pessimistic sensations. My dilemmas ultimately led me to ask myself a series of questions that I would like to consider in this chapter, as they speak to a very realistic side of methodology and theory that is often overlooked. Namely, does not being able to resolve challenges in the field undermine our ethnographic findings? What consequences do these unresolved challenges have on the anthropologist, on the field, on our methods, and our theories? Is there a link
between experience of research and validity of research? What role do our emotions play in data gathering? And should these emotions be accounted for?

I will start by explaining in what way my experience of fieldwork was uncomfortable. I will then show how personal experience is inextricably tied to the methodologies we choose and the theoretical arguments we make. This in turn will lead me to argue for a wider admission of subjectivity in anthropological research and for the acknowledgment that anthropological theory is shaped by the emotions and personality of the anthropologist in the field. Emotions and feelings impact and shape not only the experience of fieldwork but also what fieldwork represents and is, which in turn affects of findings. I will aid myself in this discussion by referring to a body of works that acknowledge the difficulties an ethnographer might encounter while also looking at the productive side this creates (Corsino 1987, Lareau & Shultz 1996, Hume & Mulcock 2004, Gardner & Hoffman 2006).

I wish to speak to the tendency of addressing uncomfortable fieldwork only when difficulties have been overcome while in the field (Hume & Mulcock 2004). We only know about Abu-Lughod’s initial difficulties with her choice of topic because she changed the course of her research (1986); similarly we only know of Brigg’s malaise in the field because she decided to make emotional responses the object of her enquiry (1970). By giving a raw account of fieldwork I wish to not only show that uncomfortable experiences can be theoretically productive, but that fieldwork can be profoundly – perhaps intrinsically – messy and unpolished, and that sometimes difficulties do not get resolved while in the field. The totality of the fieldwork experience – our errors, aspirations, let downs, the effects of our relations and the environment – is a formless process. What is important, however, is to reflect on the causes and consequences of such experiences on a personal, methodological and theoretical level. Unfortunately, we think that laying our experience bare, including our ‘errors’, might potentially invalidate our research (Lareau 1996). Yet it is only by speaking about these ‘errors’ as valid experiences that we will ultimately overcome this restriction that we have imposed on ourselves.

Uncomfortable Fieldwork

Anthropologists who have experienced difficulties during fieldwork talk about a wide range of issues. These include, but are not limited to, problems arising from their choice of topic (Abu-Lughod 1986), insufficient prior knowledge about the culture they wanted to study (Briggs 1970),
time constraints (Lareau 1996), the setting (Ferguson 1999), their role and position in the field (Shuttleworth 2004, Forsey 2004), their personal flaws (Haanstad 2006), their involvement with sorcery (Stoller 2004, Favret-Saada 2012), the encounter with the other (Crapanzano 2010, Jackson 2010), and their own emotional responses (Corsino 1987). My difficulties can be related to all of these. In what follows I explain them in more detail.

For starters, I made theoretical and methodological assumptions before my arrival in the field that proved to be detrimental. I assumed that such a thing as ‘violence’ could be extrapolated from and studied in conjunction to the practice of Mongolian shamanism, as will be described in more detail in the next chapter. Instead, my topic was met with concerned faces: there was no such thing as ‘violence’ in shamanism. Methodologically speaking, I intended to carry out research following a phenomenological approach\(^2\). I wanted to become close to one shaman and learn their way of being through intersubjective exchanges. I envisioned these exchanges to be carried our through embodiment – learning through direct experience on my own body. I had envisioned this methodology as a way of moving past the language barrier (I did not speak Mongolian). I assumed that a phenomenological approach could be carried out in the amount of time I had – 3 months – even though I had never been to Mongolia before, and did not know anyone personally. I had contacted a few people before my arrival, a professor at the National University of Mongolia and someone at the Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans, and both had told me they would help me in finding shamans to talk to. I thought I would have enough time to instill the kind of rapport I was looking for with a shaman, but in reality the phenomenological approach I had envisioned proved impossible to achieve. I was not able to find a shaman with whom to establish the kind of rapport I searched for, and I ended up relying much more than I intended on verbal communication and knowledge.

I chose to enter the field by myself, and not through an organization. The result was that I had no one to vouch for me, no one to introduce me as a sensible researcher. Abu-Lughod explains how critical it was for her to have had someone that could introduce her, as she also had never been to her field site before (1986). She describes how her father introduced her to the community as a trusted individual, making it easier for her to settle in (ibid). There are upsides in not having this, namely no one ever ‘claimed’ me while I was on fieldwork. However this meant that no one had the patience to teach me, either. I always occupied an ambiguous role. I did not know whom to trust

\(^2\) This phenomenological approach had been inspired by the writings of Desjarlais (1992), Jackson (1998) and Csordas (1994).
and my informants did not know if they could trust me. Moreover, I did not know what was expected of me, and no one taught me this. I was regarded as a guest, and as a guest, it would have been rude of my informants to tell me how to act. This left me physically and linguistically inept in the majority of the situations I found myself in. I felt like I had no ‘way in’, so to speak. I was missing that sense of acceptance into another family or cultural unit which anthropologists speak so fondly about.

When I arrived, the few contacts I had made during the research proposal stage gave me numbers of shamans to call. To call these shamans, I needed a translator. Finding a translator took time. When I arrived everyone was preparing for Naadam – the national holiday that lasts 5 days – so I only met my translators two weeks into fieldwork. I tried to make up for this ‘lost time’ by speaking to as many people as I could about shamanism, to get a sense of how it was perceived, but not many were willing to talk with me about it. Perhaps this was because I was a foreigner, and they didn’t trust me, or perhaps it was because shamanism is not an easy topic to talk about, or a combination of the two. I never truly understood, in those first weeks and for the rest of my stay, if individuals I spoke to had problems with how I was asking the questions or with of the nature of the topic. It was summer, and summer being the only tourist season in Mongolia, most Ulaanbaatarians doubled as translators, guides, and drivers – including shamans. It was often difficult to find a time to meet with them. It was not uncommon to be told to call back in a few days, or given an appointment the following week (which could even be cancelled). In the search of trying to find that one shaman I could work with, I spoke to 11 shamans, who all had contrasting views on what shamanism represented. This was confusing and at the same time frustrating as I felt I was barely only scratching the surface with all of them.

There was one shaman, Amga, whom I would have really liked to work with, for the simple fact that he inspired trust in me. Unfortunately he worked as a driver for tourists so he was unable to meet often. There were two shamans that agreed to work with me more closely – Zorigtbaatar and Shuree. Zorigtbaatar was the head of a shaman association called the ‘Center of Shaman and Eternal Heavenly Sophistication’. In my first – and only – interview with him, he told me that I had a dark spirit following me, probably left from one of the other shamans I had spoken to. He told me he could take it away from me. He then told me that I lacked physical power, adding that if my boyfriend was there I could have taken that power from him. Towards the end of the interview, he added that if I wanted to, he could teach me the ‘shaman dance’, and that it would be particularly useful for me, as it would produce the same energy that I was to take from physical contact with my
boyfriend. After the interview, apprehensive and confused, I asked Urangoo to better explain what he had meant by that. Embarrassed, because Mongolians do not usually speak freely about such topics, she explained that he thought I lacked a particular kind of energy, which could be restored in me if I was to have sex or learn the ways of the shaman. Zorigtbaatar had told me to come alone if I was to see him again, but since he had spoken about sex and the shaman dance, I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do. I didn’t have the tools to judge whether I should trust him or not and I was unsure of how much I was willing to put myself on the line. Given my phenomenological approach, I had envisioned putting myself on the line indeed, learning through embodiment. I had not envisioned being scared, and not having the confidence to do so.

The second shaman who allowed me to work with her more closely was Shuree. I observed 8 rituals conducted by her, 5 healing rituals, 1 curse removal, 1 celebration of the shaman new year and 1 initiation of a new shaman; taking part in 1 of them by assuming the role of client. This could have been the perfect time to carry out a phenomenological approach, or in any case a more nuanced approach that went past language. I took detailed notes of what she did, how people around her reacted, and the tools she used – yet this meant very little without putting it in context. She was always busy before and after the rituals, so I was able to conduct only two informal interviews with her. This helped me understand certain things, but during the rituals I was mostly unaware of what was going on. I was solely an observer, not an active participant. Although I strained to observe as much as I could, there were even times when I was, frankly, bored. My translators tried to keep me up with what was being said in the exchange between Shuree and her clients, mainly telling me the clients’ ailment and what Shuree was doing to help them. Not exactly what I was looking for. Even though Shuree is without a doubt the shaman I worked more closely with, I felt like I wasn’t getting very useful information from the exchange.

Another issue I had concerned the use of translators. I took Mongolian language courses for the duration of my stay, but unfortunately it turned out I possessed no skills for it. Hence I made heavy use of translators, as most Mongolians do not speak English. I had two translators, Urangoo and Tsengel. Because I used translators I was not in direct contact with the data I was gathering, I envisioned everything as being filtered through them. When I realized that interviews and discourse were to become two of my most prominent sources of information, I was distressed by the fact that I was only the passive receiver of the translated English text. Even though I was there as my interpreters translated interviews, my purpose was to type up the translation they were saying out loud. I felt excluded from the translation process and felt that this weakened my position in being
able to carry out a discursive analysis. Moreover, I feel that because I did not speak the language, my informants were not that interested in having exchanges with me, and indeed I was not able to build any close rapport with them, although the language barrier is not the sole culprit.

Certainly the primary cause of my distress, apart from the difficulties related to the choice of topic and timing of my research, was the encounter with the ‘other’. The encounter with the other inherently brings with it a form of exchange (Crapanzano 2010, Jackson 2010), and in my case the exchange was one of tension. Apart from not understanding my research, which cast me in the role of foolish foreigner or obnoxious know-it-all, my informants transmitted to me feelings of confusion and disappointment. For example my relationship with Urangoo, my translator, was always strained by money matters. In the middle of fieldwork she told me she was not willing to work with me anymore if I did not pay her more. She thought I would pay her by the day, while I thought I had been clear that I would pay her by the hour. I didn’t want to loose her, as finding translators had proved hard as it was. She told me I had been unclear about what was expected of her, while I thought she had been unclear about how she could help me. This misunderstanding, prompted by money issues, spread to how we regarded our relationship and each other, and we were never able to settle it.

My relationship with the other was strained also because of how shamanism was spoken about. The topic itself was riddled with tension. Most warned me against curses. I was constantly told how to or not to act, what to wear, how much to pay them, all so the shamans wouldn’t be offended. When I would ask more specifically how I should act, or what offerings I should bring, people would shrug their shoulders and say, its different for every shaman. I was expected to know and not many were willing to teach me. I became scared of curses too. In addition, shamans transmitted to me feelings of discontent in my research: I wasn’t asking the right questions. They didn’t really understand what I was doing, for starters. What’s more, since I was a foreign researcher, I was expected to ask knowledgeable questions, and I did not deliver on this. On the whole I felt no positive emotional bonds with informants, except for maybe a couple who nonetheless did not become key informants for my research, like Amga.

The way that I responded to the above difficulties, emotionally speaking, was with apprehension, confusion, fright, anger, loneliness, sadness, frustration and nervousness. Mentally, I allowed myself to let these experiences cloud my reasoning. I thought that everything I would do would be considered inadequate and hence allowed myself to wallow in this inadequacy. I had moments
where I thought I could change the direction of fieldwork: if I couldn’t carry out a phenomenological approach I would concentrate on verbal communication; if my topic was not good enough then I would look at other ones, like aggression instead of violence; if I felt inadequate then I had to change the way I interacted with the other. Yet however much I thought I was changing the direction of research my feelings of uneasiness did not diminish. Interestingly, however, these feelings are not discussed or written about in my field diary. I thought data gathering should be as de-emotionalized as possible.

Analyzing Uncomfortable Research

Upon my return, I initially found reassurance in Malinowski’s published field diaries. In them I found an honest emotional narration of his experience in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski, one of the forefathers of social anthropology, had often felt like he didn’t understand the locals – in his own words, he was angry and irritable towards them. He had longed for home, and felt physically and mentally strained by his experience (1967). However, at the time the diaries were published and readers discovered that he was not the affable friend of the natives they expected him to be, the anthropological community delegitimized his work (Wengle 1988). This showed me that in order to produce ‘good’ theories, anthropologists were expected to undergo ‘good’ fieldwork. What’s more, it showed that ‘bad’ experiences, or not being able to fraternize with our informants was to be regarded as a decrease in validity of the project overall. It is true that this all took place in the late 1960s, and anthropology has (hopefully) made some steps forward since then. In fact I believe we have, but not enough. Anthropologists are still expected to become an integral part of the cultural group they wish to study. This became apparent to me as I found few in-depth discussions on displeasurable field experiences in recent ethnography. It is discussed in collections of essays dedicated solely to this topic (Lareau & Schultz 1996, Hume & Mulcock 2004), but anthropologists on the whole are still reticent in discussing problematic experiences and the consequences they bring to their work.

Perhaps while reading the previous section, the reader thought that I had been ‘wrong’ in carrying out or reacting to my field experience in the way that I did. However, I would like to leave judgment aside for the time being, and focus on my experience as data. Because it is undoubtedly that – information related to my field experience. In order to analyze it I will look at the causes and consequences of this experience. Anthropologists that mention their difficulties in the field often inadvertently discuss causes and consequences. For example, Ferguson describes his feelings of
alienation in the Zambian Copperbelt primarily in relation to the disorderly city environment, which, in his view, contributed in shaping contrasting systems of meaning, disabling him from finding any cultural whole. The consequence of this was that he argued for the existence of systems of “coherent signification” (1999:228), abandoning the idea of a unitary cultural entity (Ferguson 1999). Similarly, Briggs describes how her experiences in the Canadian Northwest Territories was defined by feelings of rejection in relation to the Utku Eskimos, and that her emotional outbursts even caused her to be ostracized by the community for a period of three months (1970). As it occupied such a big part of her experience, she decided to concentrate on emotional responses and expression among the Utku (ibid). In these examples we can see the link between causes and consequences, the causes being the role or self of the anthropologist or the field itself, and the consequences being the subsequent theories borne out of these experiences. It is important to focus on causes and consequences since I would like to open the discussion on the effect that an anthropologists experience has on their methods and theories. This section will concentrate on the causes of field experiences – the setting and emotional responses, while the next will explore the theoretical consequences.

Corsino describes how anxieties about fieldwork can develop from structural features of the setting we find ourselves in (1987). For example, because of it being high tourist season, I at times automatically occupied the role of the naïve foreigner. This made it difficult to find translators and organize meetings with shamans, which caused me apprehension. The setting also required that as a researcher, I ask the right questions, which I did not. Many times the setting also forces us to acquire roles and positions we might not want (Hume & Mulcock 2004), like that of the ingenious researcher. However, although the setting definitely instigated certain emotional reactions in me, I believe that a deep discomfort in the field arose in me because I was unsure of who to be and how to act. Wengle argues that discomfort in the field arises when two things are lost: the anthropologists’ sense of self/identity and/or the mirroring capacity of seeing ourselves in and as opposed to, others in a familiar setting (1988).

My sense of self had been lost while in the field. I believed I was well equipped and prepared to make the best out of any situation I would find myself in. The way in which I entered the field reflects this: a had made a few contacts even though I had never been to Mongolia before and did not know anyone; I confided in the fact that once I was there, no matter what the situation, I would be able to confront it, both personally and academically speaking. The fact that I could not divest myself of this feeling of deep discomfort was a direct blow to how I regarded myself as a person.
Similarly, my feeling of not being able to engage with the other stripped me of the capacity of finding myself in and as oppose to others, as Wengle describes (ibid). I am not alone in this; other anthropologists who speak of their difficulties during fieldwork also mention a loss of a sense of self, and the problematic relation between self and other (Hume & Mulcock 2004). This sense of self is usually regained when they become friendlier with their informants and understand what matters to them (Abu-Lughod 1986, Stoller 2004, Favret-Saada 2012). This did not happen for me.

Wengle argues that anthropologists attempt to hold on to their lost sense of self by engaging in “defensive and reparative behaviors” (1988:21). He argues that Malinowski was able to overcome his difficulties because he was intoxicated with his work and anthropology, and that his drive and ambition to concretely add to our subject was what enabled him to overpower his lost sense of identity and self (1988). The ‘defensive and reparative behaviors’ that Wengle describes are activated when we overemphasize known traits, or disengage with the setting we are in (ibid). This is the reaction I had in relation to Shuree’s rituals. I felt I could not gain anything useful from my observations of her rituals, but it could be argued that I was unconsciously distancing myself from the situation because I did not know how to view myself in the mirror that was Shuree, and the exchange with her as a person remained a mystery to me. Wengle also mentions that the inability to learn the language or the aversion to local food (I too a dislike to Mongolian food) are defensive and reparative behaviors as well (ibid) – and I undertook them both. Moreover, the fact that I regard the sum of my experience as uncomfortable can be seen as a ‘defensive and reparative behavior’ – it contributed to distancing myself further from the field. Hence the cause of my distress was not only the setting, but also my own coping mechanisms.

The anthropologists’ self, emotions and feelings are often overlooked during fieldwork, apart from when they are essential to particular methodologies, like phenomenology. Specifically, emotions become relevant when analyzed in local epistemologies, as this can tell us more broadly about the human condition (Jackson 2010) or, they become relevant is analyzed as being formed in intersubjective space, between the self and the other (Crapanzano 2010). I was not able, when in the field, to gain an understanding of how local epistemologies, or the other, were implicated in the formation of my own emotions. However, I was able to ascertain that the feelings I had were closely linked to the methodologies I chose.

Sometimes it seems that anthropologists talk about emotions because they are more interested in psychological endeavors and finding out about themselves rather than the ‘other’, as was the case
with Michael Leiris (1934). Incidentally, I do agree with Leiris that anthropological fieldwork can be as informative of the self as it can of the ‘other’. But most of all, I wish to discuss emotions and the anthropologists’ sense of self because they are inextricably linked to methodology. Who we are as a person influences what and how we study what we study (Briggs 1970). This relation between self and method should be explored.

Before entering the field, I chose to follow a phenomenological approach. By following such an approach, I anticipated looking at the way in which knowledge is formed in intersubjective space as well as through the body (Knibbe & Versteeg 2008, Desjarlais 1992, Csordas 1994). I not only believed that phenomenology held theoretical validity, but I had chosen it because it is a personal conviction of mine that we can only know about the ‘other’ through an engagement with the self. In other words, I believe the categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are known in terms of each other, they are mutually dependent. Therefore I wanted to know about the other by reflecting on the in-between space between the two, formed during exchanges. When my phenomenological approach was undermined, I concentrated more on interviews – which I was not in control of, as I did not speak the language – and observations – which I felt I could not put into context and left me feeling bored. The position I acquired in the field was that of an anthropologist who only shows up at a few rituals or interviews, and then returns to her expat coffee-house to write up the notes because she does not know where else to go. This methodology made me feel very uncomfortable. It was unsuitable for my sense of self and for my idea of how cultural knowledge is acquired. Although I do not mean to discredit the familiar ‘participant-observation’ method, which is essentially what I undertook, I realized that this method alone was not enough for me. I was seeking a method and an involvement that the field – for a variety of reasons – could not give me. It surprises me that personal predispositions are not spoken about in methodology classes. In choosing our methods we should not just think of what will be possible in the field, but also what will be possible and acceptable for us personally. This leads me to argue that there is potentially no right or wrong way to carry out anthropological research, because methodology is a personal affair. Fieldwork must be seen as an idiosyncratic and unrestricted process.

Leiris was a surrealist ethnographer and writer. In his ethnographic work, *L’Afrique Fantome* (1934), he blends ethnographic research with autobiography, giving detailed descriptions of his personal moods, almost turning it into a diary. In a way he wanted to encounter the ‘Other’ to know himself – and thought that by pushing subjectivity to the extreme he could gain a truly objective account (Wynchank 2011).
Arguably, my emotions overshadowed my fieldwork. It could be said that the ‘defensive and reparative behaviors’ that I developed hindered my experience. Could there be a time when fieldwork becomes too personal, then? I believe there is, and my account is a representation of that. However, we should not see this as a hindrance to the theoretical project overall. Anthropologists are constantly learning about and expanding on our discipline through the work that they do. In my case, my overly emotional experience led me to argue that methodology is intricately tied to the personality of the anthropologist and in the next section, I will argue the implications my experience had for the way I view anthropological theory. The theories and convictions I present in the next section are such because of my experience. If personality affects the methods we choose, and the methods we undertake while in the field define our overall emotional experience, the theories that we will argue for are a direct consequence of this exchange.

Theoretical Consequences

The way in which we practice ethnography is tied to the theories we will make about it. To refer back to Malinowski, for example, Wengle maintains that it was his uncomfortable experience of fieldwork that led him to argue for a functional theory of society (1988). Similarly, my experience in the field has influenced my stance on the way in which I think anthropological theory is constructed. I wish to touch on two issues, that of subjectivity and that of validity.

Much has been said on the issue of anthropology as a subjective practice and the part this line of thought played in the ‘reflexive turn’ in anthropology (Ortner 2005). As part of this reflexive turn, which started in the 1980s, anthropologists questioned their positions in the field and the legitimacy of their theories and work. They argued that anthropology must not be seen as an objective endeavor made by objective researchers, but as inherently subjective, both in its practice and its theoretical implications (ibid). However, although the subjective stance has been increasingly developed and accepted in anthropology, we have not yet been able to fully move ‘beyond it’ (Krieger 1996). By this I mean that we are still debating whether this is true or not rather than accepting it as fact, and its implications have still not completely been taken into account. As I have attempted to show in the previous section, fieldwork is subjective. The ‘defensive and reparative behaviors’ and whether we overcome them or not, are subjective. It goes without saying that if I were a different person, the outcome of this research would have been completely different. If the ways in which we acquire data is subjective, then the theories we make out of this data will be subjective too. And if anthropological theories are subjective, then all types of subjective
experiences in the field should be treated as legitimate. Yet we still refrain from discussing uncomfortable fieldwork, and give an impression that our understandings come from solely positive exchanges with our informants.

I propose two ways of overcoming this. One is to take our experiences and clear them of all judgment. Having been discouraged from my field experience, it was hard for me to engage with it once I returned home. This was because I thought the way I had carried out fieldwork was incorrect, and as such nothing valid could come out of it. I am not debating that perhaps it was indeed incorrect, but I believe the question is another. The question is what do our experiences tell us about our topic and the practice of anthropology, not whether they are right or wrong. By taking our experiences as valid no matter their status, we are treating them as data, making subjective theories out of subjective experiences.

Another way of moving ‘beyond’ subjectivity is to look at the question of validity. Is a theory less valuable if it is informed by negative experiences? Wengle argues that a theory’s validity should not be based on the fact that it is informed by subjective experiences (1988). He argues that theories gain a life of their own, and they should be judged for their worth, not for whether they have been subjectively constructed or not (ibid). If a theory’s validity is not tied to its subjective quality, then it should not matter if this subjectivity is informed by positive or negative experiences. The outcome of my research hinges on the fact that I had a subjectively uncomfortable field experience. My discomfort was also partly engendered by a rejection of the topic I wanted to study; hence in Chapter 2 I will argue that violence is not a theoretically useful concept for understanding shamanism in Ulaanbaatar. The uncomfortableness I talk about is a subjective representation of what I experienced while in the field. Apart from the fact that it was uncomfortable, it is just like any other field experience. Hence like any other field experience it will influence the way in which I view my own topic and the practice of anthropology on the whole. For this reason, it is as valid as any other theory based on subjective experiences.

In arguing this I follow those anthropologists who argued that anthropology is deeply personal and autobiographical (Van Maanen 1988, Hume & Mulcock 2004). Rather than arguing whether this is the case or not, I propose we take this as a fact and look at the consequences that this brings. The consequences are that emotions start to play a more important role in the making of ethnography, negative experiences are seen on the same level as positive experiences, and methods and theories can be viewed as products of personal endeavors.
Conclusion

I hope to have shown that even if field experience does not go as planned, or is riddled with ‘mistakes’, or tensions are not resolved while in the field, it can still acquire meaning if we look at the consequences this experience has on our theories. I believe there is a need to speak clearly about the process of fieldwork and the way in which we acquire our data – which includes discussing our errors and difficulties. In turn, as I have argued, this helps to highlight the links between the self/anthropologist, methodology and theory.

Finally, we must be aware of the impact we have on our research, but also, how our research impacts our emotions (Martin-Ortega & Herman 2009). For this reason, I encourage anthropologists to consider their own emotions in data gathering, and use them as objectified data. I myself did not mention my own emotions or loss of sense of self in my field diary, because I believed ‘good’ anthropologists did not dwell on such things. However, I realized that the goal was not to make our field experience less emotional as possible so that it could be ‘better’; the goal was to make any experience theoretically valid, regardless of whether it is ‘overly emotional’ or not.

Uncomfortable fieldwork, and fieldwork in general, never really ends even after leaving the field. Images, emotions and consequences are still very much alive. Fieldwork, regardless of its positive or negative impact on the fieldworker, is life changing. Not only do we learn about others, but also about ourselves and our practice.
The Concept of Violence

By the time we reached the ger, the spirit had already entered the shamans’ body. We had been told that this was a relatively ‘new’ shaman; he had received the spirit only 3 months ago. He was still getting used to the spirit being in his body, and on this day his spirit was there to talk to his assistant and family members, not to perform a ritual. His children silently ushered us to the couch.

There was a woman sitting in front of the shaman, and after a couple minutes Urangoo whispered to me that the spirit was helping the shamans’ wife with her heart problems. After laughing at her for bringing him milk and not vodka, he told her to lift up her shirt and kneel down in front of him. On her back were what looked like old scars. The shaman then took the gormol (leather whip) hanging from his right arm and whipped her back 6 times, first 3 soft whips and then 3 hard ones. The woman’s body shook at the last 3 whips but she did not make a sound. As she got up and pulled down her shirt, she glanced at me. In her eyes I read slight embarrassment at having been vulnerable in front of a stranger.

I was able to speak to her after the spirit left the shamans body. “The harder the better, it helps to get rid of the really bad stuff”, she said, “why should I question something that is curing me?”

I went to Mongolia with the intent of studying violence in shamanism, specifically the way in which violence is legitimized and experienced as a constructive process by shamans and their clients. I was interested in a type of violence that was both physical and non-physical, understood as what is mentally and physically exhausting and debilitating. From a theoretical standpoint, I was ready for a ‘Mongolian’ understanding of violence, perhaps one that would allow it to have constructive and beneficial aspects too. In ethnographic accounts on Central Asian shamanism, I found evidence of physical and non-physical violence being undertaken during shamanic exchanges. Inner Asian shamanism has been previously described as beginning with a sickness inflicted by the spirits (Eliade 1964, Balzer 2011, Buyandelger 2013) described as condemning shamans to “suffer(s) a lifetime of pain” (Balzer 2011:3). Specific to Mongolian shamanism, Buyandelger describes how spirits torment and attack shamans (2013), while Oppitz (2013) and Knecht (2013) explain how shamans are both victims and agents of violence.
Reading the excerpt from my field notes illustrated above, one might think that I had found exactly what I was looking for. Except I had not. The more I explored the areas I considered an example of 'violence', the more I realized that my enquiry was caught up in an epistemological and linguistic error. Not only had I assumed that specific acts, such as the one above, could be analyzed under the rubric of violence, but I had also envisioned the analysis to be guided by a culturally-bound understandings of what ‘violence’ meant. Instead, I was repeatedly and vehemently told that violence had nothing to do with shamanism. My interlocutors were even rather offended that I had envisioned such research. Why? This is the main question I wish to tackle in this chapter.

I will start by analyzing the existing theories on the link between violence and shamanism. Specifically, I wish to look at what in the literature had been distinguished as analytical and experiential approaches (Schmidt & Schroder 2001, Whitehead 2004). These two approaches, albeit making similar assumptions on the topic of violence, lead to quite different considerations and methodologies. Both of these approaches had inspired me, but ultimately it was the experiential approach which enabled me to move past my initial question and argue that violence has no place in the understanding of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar. In a way, then, this is also a description of my own theoretical journey through the topic of violence, and what my research in Ulaanbaatar shows about it. I will be looking at ‘violent’ performative and discursive acts and explaining why, on a discursive level, these acts were not classified as violent.

I believe that anthropological theories on violence lack a discussion on whether our informants deem violent what we, the researchers, do. I have found incredibly little ethnographic data on this distinction. Moreover, in the ethnographies on violence that I did find, it was unclear to me whether it was the anthropologist or the informants that was calling the practice violent. I believe the confusion was due to the fact that most times local understandings of what the concept of violence meant were not explicitly taken into consideration.

That being said, I did find two examples of when violent acts were not recognized as such by an anthropologist’s informants. In the first, Kiefer studied the violent practices of the Tausug of the Philippines, even though he admits that the Tausug have no specific word for violence (Kiefer 1972). He advocates that the violent acts are associated with ideas of masculinity, but to explain them he still calls the acts themselves ‘violent’ (ibid). In the second example I found, Abbink, writing about the Suri of Ethiopia, argues that what has been labeled a ‘culture of violence’ is in fact not seen as such by the Suri themselves, for reasons tied to imaginary and discursive cultural
conventions (2000). Abbink refrains from calling these acts violent, and instead tries to understand them in local terms. This is what I will also attempt here. Ultimately I hope the reader will understand why the example sited above cannot be called an example of violence.

‘Violence’ in Shamanism

The two main theoretical pillars for my research into violence and shamanism, prior to my arrival in Mongolia, were two edited collection of essays: *Shamanism and Violence: Power, Religion and Suffering in Indigenous Religious Conflicts* edited by Riboli & Torri (2013) and *In Darkness and Secrecy: The Anthropology of Assault Sorcery and Witchcraft in Amazonia* by Whitehead & Wright (2004).

Riboli & Torri explore the link between shamanism and violence by looking mainly at Central Asia. The book was intended to even out the increased attention that anthropological writings on violence and shamanism had given to the region of South America, owing to the researches of Whitehead (2002) and Fausto (2007), among others. In this collection, Riboli & Torri present a selection of essays that look at shamans as simultaneously ‘passive’ victims and ‘active’ perpetrators of violence. This violence is discerned throughout the book by looking at the shamans’ verbal and physical actions as well as their use of objects and ritual paraphernalia. Moreover, they describe the shamanic exchange as one that is ‘warlike’ and characterized by resistance, from the part of both shamans and spirits (Riboli & Torri 2013). Some examples taken from the book include: shamans’ ritual actions, like the use of swords and bow and arrows, are seen as symbolic representations of ‘wars’ that are going on between the shamans and the spirits (Oppitz 2013); shamans’ reactions to encountering the spirits is described as painful for shamans (Knecht 2013); and spells and discourse pertaining to shamanism are analyzed as being a dangerous affair, violence discerned in the choice of words that are used (Syachenko 2013, Oppitz 2013). These models not only helped me form the conviction that violence and shamanism were inherently linked in Central Asia, but they also gave me ‘examples’ to look out for: violence seen through performative and discursive acts, as well as objects.

Whitehead & Wright on the other hand, in their edited volume on shamanism and violence in South America, concentrate on cultural understandings of how those who heal also assault, and analyze violent acts done by shamans/sorcerers and the cultural ideas associated with them (Whitehead & Wright 2004). They argue that aggressive practices are just as endemic to the practice of shamanism.
as curing rituals. However, while Riboli & Torri do not specifically explain who is calling the practices they are interested in violent, Whitehead & Wright are concerned with local understandings of what violent and aggressive acts mean and signify. They look at poetics and discourse, and how violent acts are understood in the local lexicon. My idea was to detect ‘violence’ – in what they did, what they said – like Riboli & Torri had done, and then analyze it in terms of their cultural beliefs and considerations, adopting Whitehead and Wright’s mode of analysis.

In fact, the data I gathered in Ulaanbaatar could be initially interpreted as supporting Riboli & Torri’s hypothesis: that violence is integral to the practice of shamanism and that shamans are in a warlike exchange of passively and actively established violence. However, when I engaged with Whitehead and Wright’s mode of analysis I saw that this was not the case. Before expanding on that, I will first describe ‘evidence’ of the violence I witnessed in Ulaanbaatar.

In terms of what was being carried out during a shamanic performance, I identified the performative actions of violence associated to shamanism as the following:

1. Beating of clients with a gormol (leather whip) or bardag (3 wooden sticks bound together, with metal charms hanging from them). This would usually be done as was described at the start of the chapter: the client would be asked to lift up their shirt, and the shaman would hit the client three times gently, and then three times with force. The bardag or gormol was then extended by the shaman in front of himself and shaken, usually in the direction of the door. This was done so that all the harmful things in the client, transferred to the bardag or gormol during the whipping, could be symbolically thrown out. These two objects were only used when the client’s ailment was perceived to be particularly injurious and hard to tackle, like in the case of the shamans’ wife heart problems.

2. Forceful massaging of clients in the area where they had pain. The client would be asked to remove any layer of clothing from the aching area and lie on the floor in front of the shaman. The shaman would then proceed to massage the area, at times with one hand and at times with two; the more injurious the problem, the more forceful the massage. Clients would wince, groan, gasp, grit their teeth and tightly close their eyelids. Often red marks were left on their skin from such forceful massaging.

3. The drawing of blood from both clients and/or animals. During what were considered to be particularly hard rituals, like the removal of curses, blood was often required. If blood was to be
taken from an animal, instructions were very specific. For example, in one of the curse removal rituals I witnessed, blood was required from the right ear of a black female dog. The client was also asked to draw blood by pricking her finger with a needle and gathering drops of blood in a bowl. The blood was then mixed with vodka and given as an offering to the spirits.

4. The killing of animals for sacrifice. The animal in question was usually a goat or a lamb. The shaman themselves never did the killing, they conducted purifying rituals over the goat first, and then it was their assistants who did the killing. Two men from the audience were called to help secure the lamb or goat onto its back by holding its legs. A purifying mixture of milk and herbs was then poured onto the belly of the animal. Then the assistant took a sharp knife and placed three deep cuts on the belly of the lamb where the milk had been spilled, inserted his hand inside the belly, and took the heart out. The animal was then brought to a different area to be butchered. Animal sacrifices were usually conducted during celebrations or in situations of disease or death. In both cases the animal is seen as an offering to the spirits, to either invite them to join the celebration (in case of a festive occasion) or in order to placate them (in a situation of disease).

In terms of what was said, I identified episodes when violence was discursively created:

1. The shamans encounters with the spirits. Encounters with spirits were described as leaving shamans tired, or as if they had been drained of their energy (although at times it can be quite the opposite, and the shaman describes leaving the encounter feeling elated and energized). Some reported feeling dizzy, having stomachaches, and wanting to lie down. At times, if the ritual was deemed particularly hard – for example, removing curses or disease – the shaman would say that this made him lose years of his own life. The initial encounter with the spirits, when the shaman still does not know that they will become a shaman, is usually described as the most dramatic encounter with spirits. Shamans and their family members report feeling sick and the inability to 'cure’ themselves of their ailments.

2. The character of the spirits. Spirits are described as devious (genesen), fierce (khertsgii), aggressive (dogshin), angry (uurtai) and forceful (hatuu). Some spirits are described as very powerful, sometimes even vengeful. Shuree told me that she had a very strong ancestor spirit that came to her only at times, and that once he had asked for the sacrifice of a human child. She did not agree so the spirit had forbidden her own spirit from re-entering her body at the end of the ritual. This went on for 40 minutes, which is considered to be extremely dangerous.
These instances show that ‘violence’ was not only present in practice, but also in discourse. Acts included whipping, forceful massaging, drawing of blood and killing of animals. On the discursive level, referencing draining encounters and aggressive spirits created a realm of violence. If I was to take the approach of Riboli & Torri, these performatve and discursive acts would be classified as violent at face value, as I did here, and explained in social terms. This means I would take an analytic approach to violence⁴, although Riboli & Torri do not specifically define it as such. Analytic approaches define an act as violent a priori and then attempt to understand it, and use predetermined notions on how these acts fit in the social sphere. Analytic approaches to violence are known in the literature from the work of Schmidt & Schroeder (2001) and Stuart & Strathern (2002). They build on the work of Riches (1986) and view violence as a social practice, a performance that reflects social and cultural paradigms (Schmidt & Schroeder 2001, Stuart & Strathern 2002). An analytical approach to violence initially helped me to establish the episodes of ‘violence’ described above as violence, and led me to infer, before departing for the field, that there was such a thing as violence in shamanism. However, my experience in the field showed me that this had been misguided.

Analytical approaches use pre-conceived categories of violence to isolate violent acts. Furthermore, they use predetermined ideas of what these acts represent in order to understand them. When I asked my informants if the above actions and discourses were violence, I was met with blank stares, sometimes even offended expressions. If I asked what they did represent, my informants would say that it was either a cure, or simply a customary shamanic exchange between spirits and humans. It became clear to me that these performative and discursive acts were not considered to be violent at all, although the analytical approaches to violence had led me to argue that they were. What was interesting was that it was not just shamans and their clients who did not see these acts as violent – all people I spoke to told me that violence had nothing to do with shamanism. Hence the question, why not violence?

In order to answer this, I increasingly turned to Whitehead & Wright, who call for an experiential analysis that starts by questioning the very category of violence and what it is applied to

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⁴ Explanation of violent acts in social terms could also take a functional approach. Functional approaches are similar to analytical ones in that they both use a pre-defined notion of what violence is. However, in functional approaches, violence in ritual is seen as conductive for the social order, and as a form of social cohesion (Bloch 1992, Girard 1977); while in analytical approaches violence does not necessarily lead to social cohesion although it can be reflected on in social terms.
Experiential and analytical approaches have the same objective: finding the true ‘meaning’ of violence and understanding it in relation to the cultural setting. However, their methodology differs. Analytical approaches look at practical and symbolic expressions of violence. Violence is seen as rational action according to cultural paradigms (Riches 1986, Schmidt & Schroeder 2001, Stuart & Strathern 2002). Experiential approaches, on the other hand, focus on the perceptions and experience of the victims of violence. It is focused on local interpretations, discourses and performances (Nordstrom & Robben 1995, Whitehead & Wright 2004).

I propose we try to understand these ‘violent acts’, then, by first and foremost looking at local understandings of violence, following Whitehead and Wright’s call. Next I propose we look at the logic of this violence, in other words, analyze the discourses and ideas that surround these supposedly violent acts. Whitehead called this understanding the ‘poetics’ of violence (Whitehead 2002, 2004). My ultimate goal will be to show how these acts described above are indeed not violent. The analysis presented here will be based on informal interviews and conversations, hence it is an analysis done on the discursive level of understanding.

The Meanings of Violence

Both analytical and experiential theories on violence argue that the first thing to do when researching an elusive topic is to understand it in the context of that culture. Yet they do this via two different routes. The analytic approach looks at certain acts, defines them as violent, and then tries to understand how they fit with the cultural whole, using local perceptions to understand and expand the concept of violence (Schmidt & Schroder 2001). The experiential approach instead looks at the local concept of violence itself, and whether this can be applied to explain certain acts of ‘violence’, in addition to how these acts are understood by the local population as fitting in the cultural whole (Whitehead & Wright 2004).

Riches put forward an analysis of the anthropology of violence in the late 1980s and his work is still widely referenced today, especially by those following an analytical approach. Yet he does not look at cultural definitions of violence, instead, he takes an Anglo-Saxon understanding of what violence means, and then looks at the ways in which this understanding of violence can be discerned in different cultural settings. He is thus building on the line of thought of Kiefer, who deemed the violent practices of the Tausug people of the Philippines as a representation of violence, even if the
Tausug do not have a word for violence itself (Kiefer 1972). Anthropologists that follow this approach have also looked at the emotional dimension and the imaginary, as a way of showing the invisible structural workings of violence (Schmidt & Schroeder 2001, Stewart & Strathern 2002). These approaches claim to understand violence as cultural phenomena, but at the same time, it is our definition of violence that is put forward, rather than that of our informants.

The experiential approach, on the other hand, looks more closely at how ‘violence’ is experienced. Whitehead, one of the main proponents of this latter approach, stresses the importance of understanding it in local meanings. His thoughts are articulated in his ethnography on the violent kanaimà practices in South America (2002), as well as in the collection of essays he edited with Wright (2004). In these two anthropological works, violence is understood on a discursive level. It is argued that violence is not only a practice, be it symbolic or not, but also a discourse; and that local discourses on violence are key to understanding the role that this concept plays in society (Whitehead 2002, Whitehead & Wright 2004). Before analyzing an act as violent, they argue that one must look at the culturally bound understanding of what violence means (ibid). This model has been taken up by anthropologists who argue for the importance of lived experiences and interpretation (Nordstrom & Robben 1995) and those that argue for a phenomenological understanding of violence, where there are no concepts or categories for understanding violence a priori (Staudigl 2014). I believe that attention to local experiences is key in understating difficult concepts like violence. It is what made me realize that the discursive and performative ‘acts of violence’ described in the previous section could not be understood under the rubric of violence, and that if I did analyze them as such I would be arguing for something unknown to my informants. To understand why it was not violence, I will first consider weather my informants and I had different ideas as to what violence meant and represented.

A dominant English definition for the word ‘violence’ is “a behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something” or as “strength of emotion or of a

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5 It has been argued that our interpretations should move beyond that of our informants, and that we should attempt to uncover the underlying patterns that govern what our informants believe (Bourdieu 1977, Mahmood 2001). With regards to the anthropology of violence, theories have been put forward which show that there can be instances when informants are subjected to but do not recognize episodes of violence (Kleinman 2000, Farmer 2004, Schepet-Hughes & Bourgois 2004). This violence has been called symbolic (Bourdieu 1977), structural (Farmer 2004), societal (Kleinman 2000) or cultural (Galtung 1990). The writers that tackle such instances of violence have exposed and helped condemn intricate situations of domination, exploitation and mistreatment. Violence in these situations is labeled as such as it is seen as restricting the individual, or the self. I did believe that ‘violence’ in shamanism could not be boiled down to instances of unrecognized restriction or domination. Moreover, I was more interested in how these episodes were understood by my informants.
destructive natural force.” This defines violence as being of a physical or non-physical character, underlined by it being a harmful exchange. The fact that violence is a destructive force is at the core of the Anglo-Saxon understanding of violence (Riches 1986).

The Mongolian word for violence is *khuchir khiilel*, which translated literally means ‘to use the power’. Initially I thought that the Mongolian understanding of violence centered on the usage of power rather than on it being a destructive force, and I had found the culturally bound understanding what violence was. However, *khuchir khiilel* meant ‘to use the power’ when translated literally, but in everyday conversations it was described as being more than that. Urangoo, my translator, explained it to me like this:

“when you force someone to do something they don’t want to... that is *khuchir khiilel*. Or like a punch. The most violent thing there is... are things like rape. For example, the other day, I was in the car with my dad. The car in front of us was driving very badly, I think the driver was drunk, and at one point they suddenly stopped. My dad didn’t have the time to break so he banged into them with our car. The man and my dad both got out of their cars and they started fighting. And then... the man hit my dad! Like a good punch... Right in the face! So I got out of the car, I was so angry! And I punched the man too! No one is allowed to punch my dad! But that was violent, what I did and what that man did. That’s what violence is for me. In shamanism... There is no violence.”

Here we can see that Urangoo also defines violence as a powerful act, but more than that, as an act that damages the receiver or forces them to do something they don’t want to, like rape. In fact, in everyday conversations *khuchir khiilel* was associated with forceful exchanges, just like in the Anglo-Saxon understanding. With regards to whether they defined *khuchir khiilel* as a physical or non-physical force, their views were more ambiguous. When I asked informants to describe what it was, they would always refer to damages done to the physical body, like Urangoo did. When I asked about non-physicality, like discrimination or mental torment, they would refer it back to physical aggression in the first place. Bolorsaikhan, who worked at the headquarters of the Human Rights Commission of Mongolia, explained that mental abuse is usually only inferred when there have been physical repercussions, but that generally most complaints about abuse and violence were about physicality. Therefore, I would argue that the understanding of *khuchir khiilel* is mostly based on the use of physical force, used with the intent to harm. As we can see, violence and *khuchir khiilel* are understood quite similarly.

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6 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/violence
Yet when it came to calling an act in the shamanic setting as *khuchir khiilel*, none of what I would have labeled as ‘violent’ was described as *khuchir khiilel* by my informants. If we had a similar understanding of the concept of ‘violence’, why did they not call what I called violent, violent? There was not, as Whitehead had led me to predict, a culturally bound understanding of what violence meant. Violence for my interlocutors meant almost exactly what it meant for me. Urangoo and I agreed that punching someone in the face constituted a violent act. So why was whipping someone not viewed in the same light? Was it something to do with this act being carried out in the midst of the shamanic exchange? Or perhaps did it have something to do with my role as a researcher? After all, my informants knew I was going back to Europe to write about them, and perhaps they did not want me to present theirs as a violent culture. My role as a researcher could have influenced why my informants refrained from using the word *khuchir khiilel*, yet I believe this is of secondary importance, as everyone I spoke to, with no exception, said that *khuchir khiilel* did not pertain to shamanism.

It could also be argued that those acts were not seen as violence because they were carried out in a ritual setting. I believe this would have been a suitable line of enquiry, but I was more interested in how these acts were rationalized, perceived and given significance in local discourse. If they were not violence, then what were they? How were they discursively understood? Looking at local definitions for violence brings us precisely to these types of questions, questions that I would not have been able to ask if I had taken an analytic approach. This type of enquiry might have been lost if I had focused on practical and symbolic representations of violence.

Not Violence

In the previous section I distinguished between performative and discursive acts of violence. I will now look at how the ‘violence’ in those two categories was made sense of, and why it is not to be considered violence in the first place. There were two sets of idioms used. With regards to the performative acts mentioned, they were not violence because they were necessary, and what is necessary is not violent. Secondly, in regards to the discursive acts, they were not violent because words and encounters with spirits referred to the use of power, not aggressiveness per se.

There was no *khuchir khiilel* in shamanism because when probed about the performative acts described above, explanations focused on the fact that they were necessary. If we refer back to my
field diary excerpt from the beginning of the chapter, we might remember that the shamans’ wife, when asked about the whipping, said that she ‘would not question something that is curing her’. Similarly, when I asked others about ‘violent acts’ in shamanism, they would say that it was not violent because it was something that is customary, necessary or purposeful. The point they were making was that the act itself was not important, what was important was that this act had a place in their imaginary of what was allowed, or part of their traditional culture. As we have seen, the act of punching the man that had punched her dad was violent for Urangoo. This is because there was no significance beyond the act itself; it was not part of a bigger traditional structure. Instead, whipping, sacrificing, massaging, and the use of blood were not violent because their meaning rested on an awareness of what was accepted and culturally established. The act of whipping or stabbing is not significant on its own, but part of a wider, necessary context.

Shamanism is today being presented in Mongolian society as a practice that is part of their traditional way of life (Merli 2004, Bumochir 2014b). It has a place in many public narratives, and has been appropriated by the state as part of the Mongolian ‘nomadic civilization’ (Bumochir 2014a). As such, shamanism cannot be violent. If they were to call shamanism violent, it would be like calling their own culture violent. The Mongolian concept of violence – khuchir khiilel – carries with it negative connotations, something that is uncalled for. Instead, those violent acts were perceived as being necessary for the right completion of the ritual. Hence nothing that is associated with shamanism is to be considered violent – because what happens during a shamanic exchange is necessary and part of tradition.

Previously I mentioned that and idea of ‘violence’ was discursively created by the ways in which informants spoke of the character of and the encounters they had with spirits. Spirits were described as angry, aggressive, or forceful, among others. However, this did not mean that the spirits were violent per se. This is how the shaman Khaltar defined aggressive (dogshin) spirits:

“Yes, dogshin means aggressive, but its not just that. Dogshin spirits are not bad spirits. They must exist. They are the type of spirits that remove curses. Dogshin also means that they have more power. Their power is very strong.”

In fact, all words used to describe the shamanic exchange that initially seemed to point to it being a ‘violent’ exchange, were simply used as a way of saying that they had more power. This power was needed for particularly hard ceremonies – for example in removing curses – but was also a characteristic that was actively sought after by shamans. Having more power meant that they were
stronger shamans. Hence having aggressive spirits was desired. The more aggressive a spirit, the more power they brought to the shamans, the stronger they were perceived to be. All shamans I spoke to at some time or other told me that they had aggressive or angry spirits. They were proud to have these types of spirits, almost honored. Having those spirits meant that one could also control them.

The relations between power and ritual have been thoroughly researched. In the Mongolian context, it has been previously analyzed with regards to the production of power during ritual, the power acquired by individual shamans, and the position that they and shamanism has acquired in society (Hangartner 2011, Humphrey 1994b for an account of Mongolian shamanism and its relationship to the state). Essentially, in the Mongolian context there has been an analytical distinction between ritual, personal, and social power related to shamanism. In this context, shamans acquire personal power by embracing spirits that are forceful and angry. When Amga, a Khalkha shaman, was feeling particularly powerful and energized, he would say that he felt very uurtai (angry). Hence particular words that can be initially seen as referring to the inherently hostile and ‘belligerent’ (Riboli & Torri 2013) exchange between shamans and spirits, were in fact sought after and prized because they represented more power. To go back to the concept of khuchir khiilel, this was not violence because it was not perceived as being harmful or unwanted.

I had initially described the acts in the previous section as violent because anthropologists who had worked on shamanism in Central Asia had mostly focused on such acts when analyzing violence (Riboli & Torri 2013, Knecht 2013, Oppitz 2013, Sychenko 2013). Secondly, I had assumed that these acts took place because they had a different understanding of what violence was. But in reality, those acts were allowed to take place because they were believed to, one, be part of a necessary tradition and two, give the shaman power. Discourses on violence had nothing to do with it. In fact when I asked if they were violent, they answered that this was not the case. This is why an experiential approach is extremely important, as it helps us understand why.

The mistake I had made was that I had labeled these actions as violent a priori. I may not be alone. At best, many anthropologists are, at times, unclear as to why they call certain acts violent. At worse, they may be bringing their preconceived culturally encoded ideas of violence to bear in their

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7 As regards to ritual and power, Maurice Bloch was one of the first influential anthropologists on the topic. He argued that power is performed through rituals, and that the issue of ‘rebounding violence’ is a way for humans to get past the transience of life (1992). Asad, instead, has written about how the relationship between ritual and power has oscillated throughout history (1993). Almost all ethnographies on shamanism have some reference to power. For Mongolia, refer to Pedersen 2011 or Buyandelger 2013.
analysis much in the same way I initially did. For example, Riboli & Torri argue that violence is culturally bound (2013), yet they do not explain what violence means in local contexts and whether the acts that they are calling violent are indeed viewed as violent by their informants. Violence is inferred by reactions to encounters with shamans, just like in my examples above (Knecht 2013). Knecht describes the encounter as tumultuous, difficult, and frightening; the shamans are described as being in pain, terrible to look at, weeping fitfully and visibly shaken (2013). Yet, would the shaman have described the experience as such? As warlike? It is ambiguous whether Knecht himself perceives these acts as violent or if it is the shaman that does.

When taking into consideration local understandings and experience, analytic theories fall short. Analytic approaches usually rely on the Anglo-Saxon definition of violence put forward by Riches: that violence is always contested on grounds of legitimacy, highly visible to the senses, the understating between individual actors partaking in the violence is minimal, and it needs little specialized equipment or knowledge (Riches 1986). Furthermore, they focus on individual acts (ibid). By looking at local perceptions of the acts and discourses described above, however, we can see that they were not even violent by Anglo-Saxon standards.

Firstly, the acts I was interested in were never contested on grounds of legitimacy. In my case the act we are here calling violent were always legitimate. No one I spoke to considered shamanism to be violent. It was always a legitimate act. Secondly, we cannot distinguish in Mongolian shamanism what is a violent act and what is not. According to my informants, there was simply no violence in shamanism. Acts should be analyzed according to other criteria, which will be tackled in the next chapter. Suffice here to say that under the topic of ‘violence’ – nothing was that. It was not a useful distinction or a useful analytic concept for the study of shamanism. Looking at ‘violent acts’ meant nothing for my informants. And thirdly, specialized equipment and knowledge was indeed needed. During a shamanic séance whipping was not considered violence, but in day-to-day life punching was. This was because the shaman was perceived to be more knowledgeable in the local traditions. Specialized knowledge was key.

When we take into consideration what violence actually means in specific contexts, we can see that the analytic overshadowing of local meaning is detrimental. Yet if we paid attention to local meanings, we might realize that violence does not apply to the local setting. In those cases we should specify that what is being analyzed as ‘violent’ is only so in relation or as opposed to another moral community, ours (Abbink 2000). My question at the beginning of research had been
to look at *how* violence was recognize as part of shamanism. Instead my informants and field experience led me to the question of whether violence *can or should* be recognized as part of shamanism. And my answer is that in the case of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar, it should not.

**Conclusion**

Although I do not mean to discount the critical use of the concept of violence in shamanism altogether, I do wish to bring attention to how that concept is used in local understandings and experience. As I have attempted to show, in the context I found myself the concept of violence per se was theoretically insignificant. However, when I say that I could not use violence or its Mongolian equivalent as a topic for this thesis, I do not mean to advocate for its disappearance in anthropological enquiries, provided that the limitations that such a word entails are provided.

To show how the concept of violence hindered my enquiry, I initially looked at performative and discursive acts of violence, inspired by an analytical approach to violence, exemplified here by the work of Riboli & Torri. I then reflected on how violence is experienced and understood in Ulaanbaatar. Drawing from discursive data I explained how what I had initially mistaken as violence was in fact part of a wider traditional culture tied to the Mongolian identity, and related to discourses of power – hence not relatable for my informants to violence, which was understood as a negative quality that had nothing to do with the practice of shamanism.

I wish to caution anthropologists to the a priori use and labeling of certain phenomena as violent. This may not only hinder our work and the perception of us that our informants have while we are in the field, but also hinders the scope of our theories. My critique of analytical approaches to violence centers on the fact that by naming it a priori we are already creating it, and thereby run the risk of perpetrating it through our writings. Experiential approaches to violence, on the other hand, are centered on the interests and perceptions of our informants. It is an approach that is both humanistic and hermeneutic (Whitehead 2004, 2009) and as such enables us to understand narratives and performances in local ways. As the theoretical concept of violence, then, does not aid my enquiry, the next chapter will focus on how narratives and performances in shamanism are to be understood.
The Good and The Bad

When talking to my informants about shamanism, I realized that our conversations would always end up in talk about what was ‘bad’ (muu) and what was ‘good’ (sain). Although the concept of violence had no place in how shamanism was perceived, there was a concept of ‘bad’ that was very often a cause for concern. However, there was little consensus about what exactly ‘bad’ consisted of, and the same exact performance could be viewed as either good or bad, depending on whom one was speaking to. There was no clear distinction either between what shamans, clients and laypersons thought either. For example, Shuree insisted on celebrating what was known as the Shaman New Year, while Amga said that it was only ‘bad’ shamans that took part in such celebrations. Shuree and Amga were both Khalkha shamans. Similarly, Shur-Erdene considered shamanism to be ‘bad’ if the shaman physically hurt their clients, while Urangoo considered it to be bad if they asked for too much money for offerings. Shur-Erdene and Urangoo were both self-professed non-believers in shamanism. There seemed to be no clear cut definition as to what was good or bad, and at the same time these concepts occupied a big part of the local imaginary, for shamans, clients, and laypersons alike. It seemed that each individual had his or her own interpretation, and I became interested in what these depended on.

This widespread concern for what is bad and what is good supports a view of Mongolian shamanism as a varied and conflicting practice. Anthropologists have thoroughly observed how Mongolian shamanism lacks consistency and clear-cut meanings and classifications. Some have described these inconsistencies in terms of the different ethnicity of shamans and the diverse traditions and identities that are consequently produced (Balogh 2010). Others have looked at how it has been produced by the co-existence of evil and good spirits (Balzer 2011). Others still have placed this inconsistency at the very core of Mongolian shamanism itself, arguing that the practice has, since its very beginnings, been inherently undogmatic and unpredictable (Humphery & Onon 1996, Hangartner 2011). Recently, shamanism in Mongolia has been analyzed in terms of producing and being produced by the following characteristics: uncertainty and skepticism (Buyandelger 2007, 2008, 2013); ambiguity (Pedersen 2011, Hangartner 2011); disorder (Swancutt 2012); and doubt (Hangartner 2011). In the literature Mongolian shamanism appears to be a practice that has always been ambiguous and prey to good and bad forces; present in the cosmology it pertains to, in the imaginary it engenders, and in the beliefs it is based on. If we are to take this
ambiguity as a characteristic of Mongolia shamanism, I will look at how it is experienced and perceived today in Ulaanbaatar.

Shamanism is ambivalent, but this is not its main defining characteristic. Moreover, although interpretations of what was good or bad varied, there are ways in which these perceptions related to established ways of finding meaning. In *Fortune and the Cursed: The Sliding Scale of Time in Mongolian Divination* (2012), Swancutt explains how, during the divination process, shamans can be presented with particularly hard curses to overcome, and in order to do so it might seem that they ‘improvise’ the solution. In fact, she describes a disorderly way of recognizing and dealing with difficulties. However, she goes on to argue that this semblance of disorder actually relies on already established notions and customs, thereby making the disorder reliant on a sort of ‘hyper order’ (Swancutt 2012). Similarly, I wish to argue that talk about what is good or bad give shamanism the appearance of it being disorderly, but in fact these apparently disarranged views relate to Mongolian categories of understanding. It is these very categories of understanding that engender the ambivalence that is part of everyday shamanism. This explains how shamanism is constructed as a social phenomenon, created by social actors in social space. I am not looking at shamanism as a practice (Hangartner 2011) or as an ontology (Pedersen 2011), but as a ‘social field’ (Lindquist 2005). This means that shamanism is considered a social phenomenon in constant evolution, influenced by both social actors and political and economic forces (ibid). Shamanism, and what is good and bad must be understood as a framework that is constantly evolving and adapting to both individual and cultural pressures.

It is important not to forget that the urban setting influences the way in which shamanism is constructed, and the way in which the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are perceived in social space. It is argued that urban shamanism takes on different characteristics than more ‘traditional’ forms of shamanism. It is described as less essential to the functioning of society (Fotiou 2010) and more institutionalized, inspiring associations to be created with the aim of controlling the way in which it is practiced (Balogh 2010). Although I did find that these assertions rang true for Ulaanbaatar, I also found that there was a strong countercurrent that promoted heterogeneity. The practice of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar is influenced by the interest of foreigners travelling to Mongolia; and the state and shamanic associations seek to maximize the appeal that the practice holds by presenting it as a consistent Mongolian tradition. The urban setting has attempted to make shamanism more ‘friendly’ and understandable, presenting it as wholly good. This, however, has resulted in an attempt to erase the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent to Mongolian shamanism, which in turn has
exacerbated the already existing concern about what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’. The majority of people I met in Ulaanbaatar were frightful and uncertain about what shamanism really was. Therefore, although I did find that there was a push to homogenize the practice like in other urban settings, most of my informants considered this push to be a detrimental one to the practice of shamanism on the whole. What this means, however, is that both external and internal influences to Mongolia have affected how shamanism is perceived in Ulaanbaatar today. Its perception is influenced by notions borrowed from transnational ideas of what shamanism should be like as well as traditional categories of meaning. Therefore, in order to understand how categories of good and bad are constructed we must also pay attention to historical and socioeconomic influences.

In order to find meaning in the categories of good and bad, and understand how shamanism is perceived in social space, I will use Aijmer & Abbink’s (2000) model of finding meaning in violent phenomena. Although I am not directly speaking of violence here, I believe that their approach is useful when looking for the meaning in particularly elusive phenomena, such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ occurrences. In the Introduction to their edited book, Aijmer proposes a symbological approach, looking at the phenomenon of ‘violence’ through three different perspectives, or “ontologically defined orders” (Aijmer 2000:17): an imaginary order, a discursive order, and an ethological order. These orders are ontologically different, but taken as a whole they represent the meaning of ‘violence’ in a specific cultural context. The first order encompasses the symbols that go beyond language – metaphors, schemes, and ways of thinking – which reflect the beliefs and values of a society. The second order looks at performative ‘violent’ acts both as discourse – how these are elaborated in conversations – and practice – how they are carried out. The third order explores ideas on the human character, how it develops and evolves. I believe this approach can be useful when explaining what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ because these categories do not have meaning per se, just in the same way that violence does not have meaning on its own. Meaning is acquired when these concepts are engaged with on an imaginary, discursive and ethological level. Abbink uses this approach to analyze the ‘violent’ practices of the Suri of Southern Ethiopia. In doing so he is analyzing phenomena deemed as ‘violent’ only by outsiders to the Suri community (2000). He uses the symbological approach as a way of finding meaning in a set of occurrences that are context-dependent and guided by social relations. Similarly, I wish to understand how meaning is given to the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as they defy clear-cut classifications. Hence I propose we look at what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ from the three different perspectives: the imaginary, discursive, and ethological order.
Quick word on Black Shamanism

Before I move to a discussion on ‘bad’ phenomena in shamanism, it is important to distinguish between this and black shamanism, as sometimes black shamanism is automatically equated with what is bad: evil deeds and wrong doings. Most accounts portray shamanism as a practice with both beneficial and harmful aspects – hence Eliade claiming that the sacred was inherently tainted (1964). In the literature on Mongolian shamanism, these beneficial and harmful traits are at times represented, respectively, as white and black shamanism (Pedersen 2007). White shamanism is presented as that which heals and protects, while black shamanism is described as that which is powerful and harmful; that carries with it the potential to curse and the use of evil forces; and that incites ambiguity and fear (Pedersen 2007, Balogh 2010, Hangartner 2011). My informants also added a third type: yellow shamanism, which is said to arise from a mixture of shamanic and Buddhist practices and belief in both shamanic and Buddhist spiritual entities.

Shamans believe in the Eternal Blue Sky, a spirit world accessible only to them, which consists of 99 individual skies (tengri). Of these 99 skies, 55 are white and 44 are black. They are as levels, or rankings that shamans can ascend to. The more skies a shaman has, the more he is considered to be powerful. A shaman usually has access to both the black and white skies, meaning that they can be considered, at the same time, as being both white and black shamans. What type of shaman they are overall is indicated by which sky one has more access to. Amga, for example, had access to 33 black skies and less white skies, and therefore presented himself as a black shaman.

However, Amga and virtually every other shaman I spoke to made of point of explaining to me that if they had access to the black skies, this did not mean that they were ‘bad’ or that this enabled them to carry out evil deeds. Accessing the black sky meant that they had more power and that their spirits were more aggressive, and this meant that they had the ability to deal with more complicated healing practices, like curses. Being a black shaman did not mean that they were bad, but that they were more powerful. This power could, of course, be used in the wrong way and then fall under the category of ‘bad’, but it was the willingness of the shaman that caused this, not black shamanism per se.

‘Black’ refers to the levels that are ascended; it is a characteristic of shamanism. On the contrary, ‘bad’ is a criticism, it refers to personal interpretations and analysis of occurrences; it is a judgment on shamanic practices. Although they might seem to rely on similar characteristics: the nature of the
spirits, the temperament of shamans, or their actions, they are two classifications that are different in scope: one is an objective feature, the other a subjective opinion.

Narratives of Meaning – The Imaginary Order

There was no easy way to distinguish between what was good or bad in shamanism. Here I will be looking at how these two categories are given meaning on the imaginary level, by delineating the concepts that influence the formulation of these categories. These concepts are essentially public narratives that acquire meaning when individually evaluated. These narratives are what Humphrey calls “evocative transcripts” – public narratives intended to evoke personal interpretations beyond the meanings they receive on the surface (1994a:22). Specifically she describes them as primarily historical discourses that arose after the end of socialism in 1991 (ibid). I would like to borrow from her this term to describe the narratives that are used in distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’. ‘Evocative transcripts’ are individually assessed, and their public meaning is constantly being elaborated. ‘Evocative transcripts’, as Humphrey argues, are meant to be interpreted; they are inherently ambiguous (ibid). Ambiguity lies at the center of discourses on what is good or bad in shamanism, as the same act can be seen as both. Labeling it as one of the two is the result of engaging with and elaborating on narratives of meaning that when interpreted contribute to the formulation of an individual’s opinion of what shamanism is. They relate to ideas concerning Mongolian history, homeland, and identity.

History. History is often recounted when talking about what is good and bad, especially episodes pertaining to the reign of Chinggis Khan and that of his sons and grandsons. History in Mongolia is created “not so much by constructing sequences in a chronology as by citing precedents – snapshots, as it were, rather than a consecutive film” (Humphrey 1994a:22). The reign of Chinggis Khan is that which is most cited when talking about what is good and bad, and ‘snapshots’ of history are frequently taken from the ‘Secret History of the Mongols’ book, written some decades after the death of Chinggis Khan himself. This book is credited with showing the real characteristics and identity of the Mongolian people. Chinggis Khan is often spoken of as being a shaman himself. His cult has been tied to the revival of shamanism (Balogh 2010) and his figure is tied to both personal and national power (Merli 2004). As such, reference to his reign, or ties to his spirit or homeland is given as a way of legitimizing specific shamanic practices. Accordingly, a shaman’s ‘goodness’ is often being legitimized by links to Chinggis Khan, for examples if their ancestors come from the area where he was born – the mountain Burkhan Khaldun. Practices are considered
‘bad’ if they are considered to be in conflict with Chinggis Khan’s teachings or what is written in the ‘Secret History of the Mongols’ book. Knowledge of history is also used as a marker of judgment as whether certain shamanic practices are good or not. A shamans’ practices were ‘good’ if he knew the history of his ancestors, or if they were able to tell you parts of forgotten histories, that are not mentioned in history books. If a shaman was not able to tell a client their ancestor’s history, this was seen as a mark of being ‘bad’. As has been argued, knowledge of history represents authenticity and legitimacy in shamanism (Kaplonski 2004, Buyandelger 2007).

Homeland. Traditionally, Mongolians were nomads and herders who lived off the land and their livestock. The Mongolian landscape and environment hold great evocative power, even for people who now live in the city. The power of the Mongolian land is spoken of in reference to nature (vegetation), the landscape (mountains, rivers, forests), the Sky (or Heaven), meteorological activities, and animals. Humans’ interconnectedness with these is at the core of their understanding of reality. For Mongolians, human and nonhuman entities are interrelated with each other (Pedersen 2007). It is believed that there are many parallel worlds, and each of these worlds contains the totality of relations between all beings that inhabit it (ibid). Many anthropologists have looked at this interconnectedness between humans and the world they inhabit, and it has been argued that wind and dust help merge the individual self with the cosmos (Humphrey & Ujee 2012); that lines between nature and culture are blurred and that this creates an ecosocial sphere for humans, the environment, and animals (Fijn 2011); and that the forms of the landscape are used to determine identity stereotypes (Pedersen 2011). For the individuals that live in the city, it is the interrelatedness of the cosmos that exists in memory that is important, as they often do not have the time to frequently travel outside of the city and engage with the landscape physically. Instead, they are able to access these relations through memory and rituals. The purpose of referencing their homeland is to show all forces found in Mongolia – be they of animals, nature, or of a nonhuman form – as connected and in dialogue with each other. Accordingly, practices are ‘good’ if the shaman in question is seen to portray these connections, for example if he travels often to the countryside. Practices were ‘bad’ if they were perceived as failing to show this interrelatedness. It is important to feel this connection.

Identity. The idea of a Mongolian identity is closely linked to history and the environment, as it can be argued that it has been created by the influence of both. However, here I would like to look at identity as traits that can be discerned by looking at everyday activities and notions concerning family, ways of living, worship, rightful compensation, ancestor spirits, outlook, temperament, tools
and clothes. There is an idea of a genuine Mongolian way of being, and its specifics vary. It has been argued that since the fall of the socialist state in 1991, Mongolians have been searching and recreating their own cultural identity, believed to have been lost under foreign rule (Kaplonski 2004). In fact, Kaplonski believes that one of the major driving forces for the interpretation of history in post-soviet Mongolia is the construction of an authentic Mongolian identity (ibid). It is more than that too – constructing a genuine Mongolian identity helps evaluate what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices in shamanism. The shamans that are perceived to embody Mongolian identity, their actions are considered ‘good’. For example, rightful compensation was often used as a way of gaging whether a shaman was engaging in rightful or wrongful shamanism. Traditionally the clients had to bring an offering to the spirits, but nowadays many people see this offering being exploited as material compensation. Many people explained to me that they did not trust any shaman who asked for too much money or too much vodka. Some said they trusted those that asked for little money, but not those that asked for extravagant sums. The shamans I met that did ask for money explained that it wasn’t wrong – it was simply part of their tradition as Mongolians. Other shamans were outraged by the idea of asking money. Asking the right amount of money was seen as part of an authentic ‘Mongolian identity’.

These three ‘evocative transcripts’ are interrelated, and meaning on the imaginary level is often found by mentioning more than one. History is evoked mainly in issues of legitimacy. The Mongolian homeland is evoked to stress the inseparability of humans, other living beings, and the environment. The Mongolian identity is stressed when it comes to judging whether certain practices are carried out correctly and consistent with what is perceived to be the Mongolian character. ‘Evocative transcripts’ have ambiguity at its very core, however, so these narratives can be interpreted differently. The same narrative could be evoked to legitimize or delegitimize the same practice. On the imaginary level, meaning is found by referencing these transcripts, rather than by adhering to certain rules pertaining to each one of them. For example, a client once told me that she thought Shuree’s rituals worked because she came from the same area of Chinggis Khan and she was able to tell her, the client, information about her ancestors. For another one of Shuree’s clients, instead, she was a ‘bad’ shaman because she asked for too much money.

The real imaginary use of these evocative transcripts lies in the fact that they are individually interpreted. The individual interpretations of these narratives elaborate on already existing narratives pertaining to a particular transcript. Moreover, individual interpretations also lead the way for change. Swancutt has argued that the innovations that take place in the curing of curses are
innovations because they rework already existing notions; they elaborate on already existing cultural concepts (2012). Similarly here, these evocative transcripts are individually assessed, and this assessment influences the public understanding of these transcripts, thereby creating cultural change.

**Evil Spirits and Fake Shamans – The Discursive Order**

Abbink & Aijmers’ discursive order looks at the performativity of phenomena, in terms of discourse per se and in terms of practice (2000). It is difficult to single out specific practices that are considered ‘bad’ or ‘good’, as we have seen, these categories are individually assessed and do not pertain to specific practices. However, we can talk about the discursive dimension of what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and how meaning takes shape in practice rather than as practice. ‘Bad’ practices are discursively attributed to two influences: evil spirits and fake shamans. These are not seen as part of shamanism itself, but as unwelcomed phenomena. It is believed that both evil spirits and fake shamans arise from peoples’ inexperience, fear, hatred and lesser knowledge. What’s more, some even believe that what is evil and fake is a discursive category invented by people.

When talking about evil spirits, my informants referred to bad (*muu*) spirits, infernal (*albin*) spirits, or stray ghosts. However, these evil spirits are not bad in themselves. Reason for their existence is attributed to improper human conduct or unknowledgeable shamans. For example, if someone is not given a proper burial, or is not correctly remembered as an ancestor, their spirit will become a stray ghost, who, since they have not been properly respected, will work against his own family or others - obtaining the reputation of being an evil spirit. Another reason for their existence is attributed to less powerful shamans. It is believed that shamans that have lesser power, or have not been educated well in the ways of the shaman, will be the ones to use these ‘evil’ spirits for their own purposes. Instead of giving them a proper burial and helping them progress as ancestral spirits they are accused of helping them remain stray ghosts. Unknowledgeable shamans, in their quest to show their power, will use these for their own advantage, reversing being chosen by the spirits, but choosing the spirits themselves and then corrupting them with their inhibited need for power. Yet the spirits are not evil in themselves, lesser shamans are simply using their spiritual powers in the wrong way.

Others I spoke to denied the existence of evil spirits altogether. Dagva, husband of the shaman Shuree, believed that there was no objectively evil spirits, and that these types of spirits had simply
been created in the imaginary of humans. As the practice of shamanism has been increasing in recent years, he argued, there was the need to explain why this increase seemed to go hand in hand with the increase of fake shamans – shamans that have not been chosen by the spirits, and that practice shamanism simply for material compensation. He contended that ‘evil spirits’ were a way of making sense of why there had been such an increase in the number of fake shamans. Hence ‘evil spirits’ were a discursive category of explanation for what fake shamans are accused of.

There are two types of fake shamans, those that use evil spirits and those that make up the practice completely, and use no spiritual guidance whatsoever. The former were accused of not having been instructed well, or of being hungry for recognition, power, and money. The latter were instead accused of being a false imitation of shamanism. We can see how both evil spirits and fake shamans are thought to be bad on two levels: either they are produced by unknowledgeable shamans/humans or they relied on being outright fabrications. Fake shamans were deemed to be the main reason why laypersons regarded shamanism with such ambiguity, because they could never be quite sure if someone was a fake shaman or not. Amga even thought they should not be called ‘fake shamans’ but just simply ‘fakes’ otherwise that gave the wrong impression that the practice of shamanism could be easily used in the wrong way.

Fake shamans and evil spirits give discursive meaning to what is ‘bad’ by representing in practice everything that is considered erroneous in shamanism. Some consider them to be objectively real, and evil spirits exist because there are spirits that have not been properly buried or have been used erroneously; and fake shamans objectively exist because they use their powers by using such evil spirits to their own advantage. Others, and Dagva is being a prime example, think that they are not objectively real but real only in discourse, as a way in which people have come to rationalize and understand the rapid surge of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar. With rapid increase in the number of shamans also came an increase in fake shamans, and evil spirits, and all those aspects that are considered ‘wrong’. In this climate of misunderstanding, ambiguity, and scattering of knowledge, what was bad was either fake or evil, created by ignorance or imitation.

We can see how, discursively, shamanism is presented as being not bad in itself, but only bad when its powers are used improperly. When judgment was passed on certain phenomena being bad, individuals were judging that specific occurrence, not shamanism on the whole.
When analyzing meaning through the ethological order, Aijmer explains that human activity also has a biological and genetic dimension that should be accounted for (2000). By this he means that that biology, the nervous system, and our cognitive structure also have an impact on how phenomena (like violence, in his case) is received, experienced and understood (ibid). However, this biological dimension is not thoroughly explored throughout the book. In his chapter on the Suri in Ethiopia, after a discussion on the imaginary and discursive orders, Abbink considers the historical and cultural contingences that contribute to the formations of behavior (2000). I have interpreted this as a reference to the ethological order explained by Aijmer in the Introduction. Moreover, I’ve decided to apply the category rather than define it. I believe that Aijmer is calling for an understanding of behavior as something that is in constant evolution, influenced from external as well as internal forces, and that anthropologists must look for the causes of such evolution. An analysis of the setting can only add to such understandings. Hence in considering the ethological order, I will not talk about neural structures and biology, although I also agree with Aijmer that knowledge on these can only add to our understanding of behavior, and in my case, understanding of what is perceived to be good or bad. I will however follow Abbink’s lead in looking at external influences to how the categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have been constructed. Specifically, how the urban setting and the socioeconomic state of Mongolia have contributed to the understanding of these categories in Ulaanbaatar.

Although I have not found evidence of whether ‘good’ and ‘bad’ were as strong categories for classifying shamanism in the past as I found them to be in Ulaanbaatar today, I did find evidence that suggests that the practice of shamanism in Mongolia has always been unclear. Shamanism does not follow a strict set of rules and its practice has been the prerogative of individual shamans (Humphrey & Onon 1996). Bumochir describes how in the past ‘shamans’ were diverse types of spiritual practitioners, that undertook a variety of practices (2014b). Hangartner mentions that she found accounts that show that Mongolians questioned the genuiness of shamans even before the socialist period (Sandschejew, Shirokoogoroff, Banzarov, Znamenski cited in Hangartner 2011). Humphrey & Onon explain how shamanism is made up of inconsistent parts, a combination of beliefs and practices that might seem like opposites to each other (1996). Mongolian shamanism has been presented as unclear in two ways: one, because it consists of contrasting practices, and two, because the practices themselves can be dubious and obscure. This today has been transformed in
discourses about whether shamanism is good or bad, but it seems that ambiguity has always been an inherent part of the practice.

Why have the categories of what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ become so prominent in the way in which shamanism is understood today? This has to do with the way in which shamanism evolved after the fall of the Russian backed socialist government in 1991, into a more homogenized practice. There has been a definite push to institutionalize shamanism, although most shamans whom I spoke to today are against this. Regardless, Bumochir argues that this shift had already started happening as early as the 17th century, and consolidated itself in the 19th century (2014b). His position is that the mere notion of ‘Mongolian shamanism’ has been a discursive creation, a reaction to what was going on inside of Mongolia and concerning its relation to other states. For him the concept was created by Mongolian academics, as much as foreign scholars who later came to study the practice. He identifies a trend that aimed to produce a homogenized practice and develop definitions for what it means to be a shaman and to follow shamanism (ibid). This meant that characteristics were projected from one shaman to another and from one practice to another, in the attempt to sort out who was a real or fake shaman (ibid). These trends of homogenization and institutionalization have influenced an understanding of the practice divided between what is perceived today to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

This homogenization is being led by internal forces to Mongolia as much as external forces. Internally, the state has appropriated shamanism as part of the cultural tradition of Mongolia. There are official ‘state shamans’ and shamanism is represented in all cultural celebrations or broadcastings. There are various shaman associations in Ulaanbaatar, and the one I spoke to, the Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans, showed me a booklet they had written that included the ethics and what attempted to be regulations concerning shamans, clients, and believers. They did so because “the time is right to unite all shamans” (Jargalsaikan, head of the Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans in interview). He said that they want to give the practice guidelines so it could gain credibility and legitimization in the eyes of the people and the state, which according to him still favored Buddhism as the traditional religion. There was a definite push to try and regulate, standardize and institutionalize the practice from the part of the state and associations.

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8 For example, during Naadaam in Ulaanbaatar, the 5 day long national holiday and a major tourist attraction, shamanism was publicized around the city. For example, there were flyers with the possibility to attend shamanic ceremonies. During the evening celebrations in Chinggis Khan’s Square, the main square in Ulaanbaatar, a video was projected to present all of Mongolian traditions and ways of life, and shamanism played quite big part of the presentation, which depicting images of shamans and their paraphernalia.
External influences to the practice of shamanism have developed through the influx of tourists and foreigners in the country, as well as from an exchange with ideas coming from the West. Csordas argues that one of the ways in which the globalization of religion is taking place is through the adaption of external symbols and ideas in local beliefs and practices (2009). Tourists and foreigners have become increasingly interested in shamanism, and some shamans also feel like they can use this to their own advantage. It has helped transform the practice into a market, as many shamans have started to ask for more money as offering. It is also changing the very practice of shamanism itself. One shaman told me he did not whip his clients anymore, because it gave him bad publicity and “foreigners did not like it”.

If we look at the concept of neoshamanism, which has taken hold in Western society since the 1970s, and the way in which shamanism has developed in Ulaanbaatar we can see some correlation between the two. Neoshamanism is an idealized, romanticized version of more traditional forms of shamanism; it is aimed at self-help, self-actualization, and self-empowerment (Atkinson 1992, Vitebsky 1995). It aims at essentializing the practice, rearranging it to fit with Western notions (ibid). Whitehead & Wright point out how because of this, violence and occult strategies – the more obscure parts of shamanism – have been overlooked, because they do not fit in with the idea that neoshamanism wants to portray (2004). Neoshamanism claims to be authentic, but it universalizes the practice, aims for it to be effective and western rationality is used to judge it.

In Ulaanbaatar, the concept of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as well as the idea of shamanism itself, has been influenced by neoshamanic ideas of what shamanism should be. Shamanism is no longer seen as necessary, or as a state or being or reality (as Pedersen argued is the case in the countryside, 2011). In Ulaanbaatar, shamanism has taken the form of a practice that is traditional but quantifiable, useful only if it ‘works’ for individuals. The ambiguity that was at the heart of shamanism is being conceived today as ‘bad’ and ‘good’. Fausto has already observed that this was the case for the Amazonian context – westerners make distinctions between good and bad, light and dark (2004). Amazonian shamanism also relied on ambivalence, and this ambivalence is today being understood as representing good and bad aspects of the same practice (ibid).

Hence ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have been given meaning in shamanism also due to its urban contingencies, and the exchange between Mongolia and external influences, as has been shown above. Shamanism is today presented as wholly good, and that is why, in the discursive order, bad is perceived as
having anything to do with shamanism per se. The categories of good and bad, as well as the preoccupation with them, have been greatly influenced by historical and urban factors.

**Conclusion**

I describe a setting of ambiguity, in which shamanism is individually judged as good or bad, but these judgments are also contextually dependent. The categories of what is good or bad are understood through three different perspectives that represent three different ways of attributing meaning to cultural phenomena. Together, the imaginary, discursive and ethological orders explain how good and bad are understood as part of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar today and why these discourses have developed in recent years. On the imaginary level, what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is explained by referring to evocative transcripts, narratives pertaining to Mongolian history, homeland and identity. On the discursive level, what is ‘bad’ is equated with evil spirits and fake shamans who are considered to have nothing to do with the rightful practice of shamanism itself. The ethological level, instead, explains how the understanding of these categories has evolved due to historical and urban contingencies.

Shamanism here has been analyzed as a product of and producing the social field; shaped by local, historical, social and global forces (cf. Lindquist 2005). In this social sphere that I presented, ideas of bad and good exist side by side. The state, shamanic associations, and neoliberal influences have tried to push shamanism into being a practice that is wholly good, but there is a reason why this has been largely unsuccessful. The shamans I spoke to for the most part ignored the efforts of the associations and the state, because in their view institutionalization and homogenization brought nothing to the practice. If anything it constricted them.

Ambiguity is part of shamanism, and we have seen that this is the case today as much as it was the case in the past. On the imaginary level, the categories of meaning are individually assessed thereby creating contrasting views. On the discursive level we saw that there is an essential ambiguity in shamanism, and that evil spirits and fake shamans are a discursive way of giving meaning to it. On the ethological level, I explained how attempts at homogenization and institutionalization aim to erase the ambiguity in shamanism. However, these attempts simply end up breeding even more ambiguity, as is shown by the constant preoccupation my informants had with what is good or bad. Hence shamanism is understood as a phenomenon that is unambiguously ambiguous. It is ambiguous, yet this ambiguity is created by the very precepts that define it.
Conclusion

This study developed from my initial research question, later deemed irrelevant from both my informants and myself, namely: how does violence inform the practice of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia? I have looked at this ‘useless’ question from three different angles: what it meant in terms of field experience and methodology, how it enabled an elaboration of its underlying concept – violence, and what it led me to look at instead. Moreover, I have attempted to discuss an anthropological experience that was very uncomfortable, both for myself and, I think, my informants.

In Chapter 1 I spoke about the reasons why my fieldwork was uncomfortable, concentrating on the methodological and theoretical consequences of this experience, rather than on what could have been done differently. Fieldwork was uncomfortable for me because of structural reasons pertaining to the setting I was in, and because of my own emotional responses to it. The aim of this chapter was twofold. Firstly, I wanted to show that all the experiences we have while in the field can be treated as useful data. Secondly, I wanted to show that emotions and personal experiences are important because they shed light on the methodologies we choose and what we argue in our theories. The data for this chapter, then, came not from information given to me by my informants. The data used for this chapter was based on my own feelings and reactions. It is not my informants that led me to argue that anthropology is inherently subjective and that uncomfortable feelings in the field should be analyzed, but my own experience. Unfortunately, perhaps because of time constraints or perhaps because of personal inadequacy, I was not able to view my emotions under the rubric of the other. In other words, I would have liked to carry out an analysis of emotions in the way Jackson 2010 and Crapanzano 2010 did. They argue that an anthropologist’s emotions are important because they can either be understood in terms of the other using local epistemologies and/or they can be understood as arising in intersubjective space where both self and the other are active agents. I think this is to be kept in mind, both for myself and for future anthropologists that are interested in the exchange between the self and the other. I realized this only when I came back from fieldwork, and since I had not even given myself the possibility of writing my emotions and feelings down while in the field, I did not possess the right data for this type of analysis. However, what I did have showed me that my emotional reactions were tied to the methodology that I was using and the thoughts I was having about anthropology on the whole. Chapter 1 is not complete, as
I said, it lacks a real engagement with what the self can tell us about the other. However, it can be seen as a start in that direction.

If Chapter 1 concentrated on how fieldwork was experientially uncomfortable, chapter 2 focused on how this discomfort was also born from a theoretical inadequacy of the topic I had chosen for my enquiry. This was the concept of ‘violence’. In this chapter I give particular attention to the differences between experiential and analytical approaches to the topic. While both these approaches influenced my thoughts on violence before my arrival in Mongolia, my experience showed me that an experiential approach was more suited. My main contention with analytical approaches is that ‘violence’ is defined a priori; it is already picked out by the viewer/anthropologist as an interesting arena of study. Furthermore, analytical approaches give the anthropologist prearranged tools of how to carry out an analysis of what is seen as ‘violent’ phenomena. Experiential approaches, on the other hand, look at how phenomena are experienced in local terms. The phenomena I was interested in, what I had called ‘violence’, was not experience as such by my informants. Violence for my informants was not a useful lens with which to understand what was happening in shamanism because violence was understood as being something inherently negative, while those ‘violent’ acts were understood as signifying what was necessary and powerful. If I were to take this research further, I would find it interesting to explore the Mongolian concept of *khuchir khiilel*, violence, in relation to Mongolian history and linguistics. For example, *khuchir khiilel* could be viewed in relation to Chinggis Khan’s empire or the Chinese regime. It would also be interesting to look at how violence is locally understood in other settings where there seems to be a ‘culture of violence’ – defined as such from an outsiders perspective.

In Chapter 3 I look beyond uncomfortable experience and theory, to what my useless question revealed about local uncertainties. In fact, as Chapters 1 and 2 were on the experiential and theoretical reasons for which my experience turned out to be uncomfortable, in Chapter 3 I look more closely at what was uncomfortable for my informants in the ambit of shamanism. Although shamanism could not be violent, there was one thing that preoccupied my informants and clouded the practice of shamanism in Ulaanbaatar – there was a distinction between what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that seemed to preoccupy everyone I spoke to. In this chapter I explore what this category entails, taking into consideration that this category is individually applied and there are not clear-cut definitions as to what is bad. I chose a symbological approach, one that enabled me to look at the imaginary, discursive and ethological meanings of what is considered ‘bad’. Through the lenses of what is good or bad in shamanism, I looked at how shamanism is created in social space and how
global, local, individual, and historical forces are influencing its conception. Ultimately, I argue that uncertainty and ambiguity are at the center of the understanding of shamanism, and that these uncertainties should be viewed as the certainty of shamanism.

In these three chapters I argued that experience and interpretation, context and form, are interlinked, as it has been argued before is the case both for ethnographers and our informants (Nordstrom & Robben 1995). My experience as an ‘outsider’ gained me access to discursive data, in interviews and conversations, and observational data, through attendance in rituals. The data I acquired was analyzed by taking a hermeneutical approach – one that understands phenomena in terms of local meanings and interpretation, as well as the value it acquires in social space. However, I believe topics such as violence are best understood by taking a phenomenological approach, one that I myself could not take because of time and personal constraints. Phenomenological approaches do not just aim at understanding local meanings but “meaning as it is lived” (Knibbe & Versteeg 2008:51). Understanding violence from a phenomenological standpoint means that the anthropologist would gain insight on violent practice through bodily experience and exchange with the other. I believe the understanding of violence as an anthropological category would benefit from such an approach.

It is with a bid of sadness and a touch of irony that I realize that I probably occupied a position of violence towards my informants, and I had gone there with the intention of studying violence in the first place. I call it a position of violence in the sense that I was inadvertently, in their eyes, accusing their practice of having a destructive side to it that they did not see – an imposition of meaning from my part. If anything I hope this shows that as researchers we must be aware of and engage critically with why we chose what we study, how we study it, and what we say about it.
Bibliography


