

THE ETERNAL BLUE SKY

Do you work with the Four Directions, have a concept of the Three Worlds, understand that all things are alive and with spirit, and that all beings on the Sacred Hoop of Creation are part of one big family and related? Well if you do, you are probably a Tengerist - even if you don't realise it

Nicholas Breeze Wood explores this ancient shamanic spirituality and offers it as a catch-all term we could apply to the multitude of different shamanic paths currently growing in the West

Tengerism, or Tengriism, is an ancient Central Asian animistic religion and spirituality, which has been at the root of shamanism for thousands of years. The first recorded use of the word was in C4th BCE China.

It was the religion of Genghis Khan - the great Mongolian leader - and also of generations of his descendants, and was once to be found practiced from Bulgaria in the West to Siberia in the Far East.

Tengerism also has connections with other ancient beliefs of Central Asia, mingling with, and influencing both Zoroastrianism and ancient Central Asian Christianity. This form of Christianity is called 'Nestorian Christianity,' after Nestorius, a Patriarch of Constantinople - and it was controversial with Orthodox Christians, as it held the view that Jesus was a mortal man - not divine - who had a deep and close connection to the holy spirit, allowing him to become both a healer and a messenger of God - a sort of supreme shaman figure.

After a schism with the Orthodox Church in Constantinople in the C5th CE, Nestorianism spread to Western China and Central Asia along the Silk Road, becoming a popular spirituality - alongside shamanism and Buddhism - with the Uighur people of China's Xinjiang province (East Turkestan), which lies North East of Tibet.

Nestorianism faded out after the rise of Islam and the conversion of the Uighur people in the C10th, but Tengerism, Buddhism and Nestorianism still influence the folklore of Central Asia - even in those areas which are now predominantly Islamic; for instance with the *baqshi* (shamans) in Kyrgyzstan.

Tengerism has generally been tolerant of other faiths and spiritualities. In 1254, William of Rubruck, a medieval Flemish Franciscan monk who travelled to Mongolia, met with Möngke Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, and at that time the Great Khan of the Mongol empire. Möngke Khan told William: "We believe that there is only one God, by whom we live and by whom we die, and for whom we have an upright heart. But as God gives us the different fingers of the hand, so he gives to men diverse ways to approach Him."



Currently Tengherism is having a revival in Central Asia, coming into focus once more. This refocusing is perhaps a redefining of these cultures after the collapse of Soviet domination; a looking to what is meaningful from their past, in order to bring meaning and identity to their present - but it is not a recreation of something lost, because it never actually went away - even during the times of Soviet persecution.

The countries and provinces where it can currently be found are all the countries we generally think of as the homes of Central Asian and Southern Siberian shamanism; including Tuva, Mongolia, Buryatia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Yakutia. Many shamans from these places identify themselves as Tengerists, including the late Buryat-American shaman and writer Sarangerel Odigon.

Regarding Tengherism, Sarangerel wrote the following in an online conversation in 2005:

'You do not have to be a shaman in order to practice [Tengherism]. Shamans are spiritual specialists who are called upon for certain situations of spiritual crisis, or for certain rites of passage and for healing. Most of the time [non shaman] people interact with the spirits directly through personal ceremonies done every day and in all kinds of contexts. In the western world shamanism has taken on such a confused meaning largely thanks to the New Age...'

A shaman is chosen by the spirits, and is not a 'normal' person, and yet the 'normal' people of a culture where shamanism is practiced still live by a shamanically understood cosmology - that is Tengherism. It's a bit like saying you don't have to be a vicar to be a Christian or a lama to be a Buddhist.

I see many people in the West, who are not shamans - but who have a shamanic understanding of life - struggling to give a term to their spirituality, so I offer Tengherism as a possible solution to this, I certainly would willingly say that I am a Tengerist myself, as it pretty well sums up where I am coming from.

So, what is Tengherism in real terms, how does a Tengerist see the world, and how does one practice Tengherism?

The way to live - according to Tengherism - is to live in harmony with all things in the surrounding world, respecting all living beings and all aspects of nature.

Tengerists understand that existence is sustained by the 'Sacred Marriage' of the Eternal Blue Sky and the Earth Mother. The 'Eternal Blue Sky' is the Sky Father - or the Sky Powers - which is the same as the 'Great Mystery' (*Waken Tanka*: Lakota) of the Native peoples of North America.

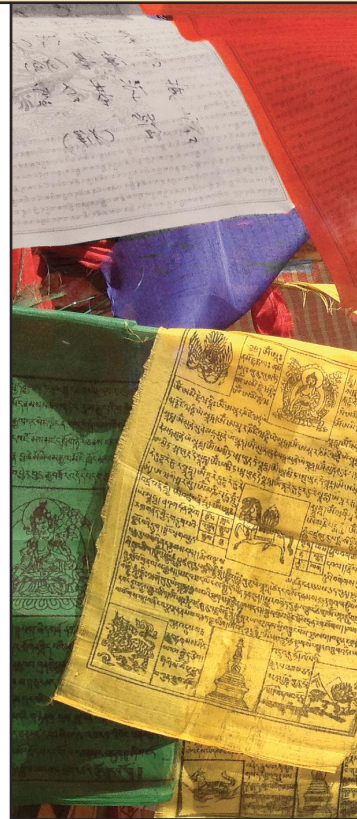
Generally Tenger or Tengri refers to the Great Sky Father, the Great Mystery, and the word 'Tenger' actually means 'Sky.'

Because of this association with the Sky Powers the sky is honoured in many ways. The commonest form of honouring is the use of sky-blue silk khadags. These blue scarves are tied to sacred places in nature and on to ritual objects such as drums etc. Other ways the sky is honoured is by sending clouds of incense smoke into it, as a gift to the Sky Father and all the local earth spirits and ancestors, or by throwing - or flicking with a special spoon - milk or vodka upwards into the air.

The Sky Father Tenger is seen as the chief amongst all the spirits, with many other lesser Tenger spirits - often said to be His sons and also called Tengers or sometimes Khans - forming a pantheon and acting as His helpers, each responsible for different aspects of creation.

Mother Earth is seen as a living goddess with a spirit - not just a dead rock in space, ripe for exploitation. This Sacred Marriage between the Earth and Sky powers provides for all the needs of all living beings.

By living an upright and respectful life, caring for the environment and all the children of the Sacred Marriage (whether that being is a human, an animal, a plant or any other child of the Sacred Marriage) a person keeps



Opposite Page: blue silk khadag offering scarf flies in the wind under the 'eternal blue sky' of Mongolia

Left: Tibetan prayer flags, with the symbol of the windhorse on them

Inset: an ancient Mongolian amulet symbolising the four directions, the sacred centre and the hoop of the world. This symbol is often used to convey Tengherism

his life in balance and develops his own personal power, which is often called 'windhorse.'

Windhorse (*lung ta* in Tibetan and *hiimori* in Mongolian) is the spiritual power of a shaman, and is a symbol important to both shamanism and Buddhism. Images of windhorses appear on Buddhist prayer flags, and the Tibetan name for a prayer flag actually is *lung ta* - a windhorse.

Below: Nestorian fresco of Jesus. Qocho Oasis, Taklamakan Desert, Xinjiang, Western China. Uighur people C683-770 CE





*All of nature is alive and
spirits are everywhere,
spirits of mountains and
lakes and trees, disease,
the sun, moon and
stars, animals, birds and
plants and ancestors.....*

All of nature is alive and spirits are everywhere. Some of these spirits are friendly and helpful, while others are hostile. These are all the normal spirits of shamanic cosmology, spirits of mountains and lakes and trees, spirits of disease, spirits of the sun and the moon and the stars, spirits of animals and birds and plants, spirits of ancestors etc.; all of the spirits of the three worlds encountered when a shaman journeys in trance.

Because everything is alive and with a spirit, all of nature needs to be respected. This is especially true of the body of Mother Earth herself, which ideally should not be dug into. Water is especially sacred, as are mountains, and they should never be damaged or polluted. Of course these are ideals, Mongolia and other areas of Central Asia are heavily mined and water sources are polluted - no one is saying being a Tengerist is going to solve all the problems of the environment, as people are people the world over.

Tengerism is a way of life, much more than a religion in the normal sense of the word, and as you are reading this article you probably already have an awareness of the sacred nature of Creation, so you are probably already practicing Tengerism.

You may already have sacred ways you live by, perhaps you have learned some Medicine Wheel teachings or you might be a Tibetan Buddhist, or have been taught a sacred cosmology from another tradition. But that does not matter, as in Tengerism there are no fixed rules you need to obey, so long as you recognise the sacred nature of Creation, the Sky Powers above and the Earth Mother below and the fact that there are many other spirits all around you, and you try to live a life where you respect these sacred powers.

However, there are a few basic practices which most Tengerists do. These are done to bring harmony to themselves, their homes and the world around them (both seen and unseen).

These include keeping a house altar, a sacred place in the home. In Mongolia these are traditionally found on the North side of a *ger* (yurt), opposite the door, but as modern buildings are not often arranged to the Four directions you will have to be creative.

Put your altar on top of a cabinet or table, or maybe on a shelf on the wall, somewhere away from doors, where it is out of the way and won't be disturbed. Put an attractive cloth down to build your altar on, and put on it items that represent sacred things to you.

It is good to burn candles and incense on it, and also to place a bowl of water. Traditional Mongolian altars also often have a small bowl of vodka. The water and vodka are offerings to the spirits and should be replaced often.

If you do shamanic work your ritual objects should be kept on, or next to, this altar.

Many Tengerists will also keep ongons on their altars.

An ongon is a spirit house, somewhere where a spirit is invited to come and live, and they take many forms - some ongons look like human figures and others are natural objects, or even painted designs on a square of cloth.

In Mongolia the most common ongons are a man and a woman called the zol zayach. These represent the family unit, and when a blessing in some form comes to the family, a small amount of decoration - perhaps a ribbon - is added to the ongons. They are kept close to the bowl of water and vodka, and sometimes bowls of milk or black tea will be added, perhaps together with a small plate of sweet food, such as small cakes; all placed in front of the ongons for



a time, before it is given to nature for the little creatures to eat.

Other ongons - representing spirits of nature or animals, or a shaman's helper spirits, or specific ancestors - may be made and placed on an altar too. All of these will be fed now and then.

The making of offerings is important in Tengerism. Besides

small bowls on altars, when you open a bottle of wine or other drink give the first drink to the spirits. This is often done by dipping the right ring-finger into the glass and flicking the liquid. When I do this, I normally make six flicking offerings, one above to the Sky Powers, one below to Mother Earth and one to each of the Four Directions around me. This also symbolises that I am in the

Above: a family altar (with a strong Buddhist flavour) inside a nomad's ger (yurt) in rural Mongolia



Opposite Page: tying offerings of cloth strips to trees and other aspects of nature is a way of honouring and making offerings to the spirits of Nature right across Siberia and Central Asia

Left: a collection of ongon dolls on an altar shelf

Right: a Tuvan shaman drums and sings to the Sky Powers

Opposite Page-top: a Mongolian shaman throws a trail of milk from a drinking cup into the sky as an offering

Opposite Page-bottom - left to right: small bronze ancestor ongons from Inner Mongolia; a metal Siberian shaman's ongon of Jesus; dressed and decorated Evenk ongon

Below: bsang burning in a Chinese bronze 'ding' incense burner on the author's outdoor altar stones

sacred centre of Creation - the place of the sacred World Tree which links the Three Worlds.

Other offerings include tying a blue khadag scarf around your altar, or around an ongon on it, or tying one onto some outside part of your home. Sometimes I put one on my front door, and there are several tied to trees and rocks in my garden.

Smudging and burning incense are other forms of offerings, and the is also traditionally said to carry prayers to the spirits.

In Tibet this practice of smoke offering is called *bsang*, and it is easy to buy beautiful smelling *bsang* incense powders from Tibetan Buddhist ritual suppliers online at very little cost. Pinches of these powders can then be dropped onto burning charcoal blocks to make clouds of fragrant smoke rise, either inside your house or outside.

Being a Tengerist is not going to make your life better, it's not going to make you a shaman, and it is probably what you already are - but sometimes it is nice to call a spade a spade instead of struggling to find another word for it, and the next



time someone asks you your religion you can confound them by saying Tengerist, and enjoy that look of puzzlement they have on their face when they ask you: "What on earth is that?" And let's face it, being a Jedi is just so passé!

Nicholas Breeze Wood is the editor of Sacred Hoop Magazine. He has made a life-long study of sacred objects and runs an online gallery specialising in the ritual objects of Tibet and Central Asia.

Nick@sacredhoop.org
www.3worlds.co.uk

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

www.tengerism.org
www.buryatmongol.org

Sarangerel Odigon wrote two excellent books about Mongolian Tengerism and shamanism: 'Riding Windhorses' and 'Chosen by the Spirits' [this book is especially recommended].

There are also many videos about Tengerism on Youtube, but most of them are in Mongolian or Russian.

Blue khadag offering scarfs are not easy to get outside of Southern Siberia but any light-weight blue silk or cotton scarf or narrow length of material would be suitable to use. Mongolian khadags are obtainable from www.3Worlds.co.uk,

Tibetan bsang incense powders come in many varieties, each one dedicated to a specific being in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon (Green Tara, Medicine Buddha, Mahakala, Dorje Phurba etc.), so you might want to Google to find out a bit about the beings offered, to choose one that suits the intent of your offering - but any would be suitable as a generic smoke offering, as would smudging sage, cedar leaves or other herbs.

Remember charcoal blocks burn with great heat, so always put them in a suitable container.

Bsang powders can be easily bought from many places online, including:
www.garudashop.com (UK)
www.tibetanspirit.com (USA)

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with the Sky Powers,
the sky is honoured
in many ways such
as throwing milk or
vodka upwards
into the air*

