

*Shamanism with Sas Carey*  
*“Indigenous Perspectives” - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net*  
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*Nergui, a Mongolian Shaman, sits for a moment during a ceremony*  
*Photo credit: Nomadicare.org; photo used with permission of Nomadicare*

Randy Kritkauskay: Bozho – greetings - dear listeners. I greet you in the language of my Potawatomi ancestors and my tribe today. I am Randy Kritkauskay, co-host of the show along with Carolyn Schmidt. This episode of Indigenous Perspectives originates, not from my tribal homeland, but from N'dakinna, the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people who for thousands of years, were settled, and were the stewards on the lands to be found here in Vermont in the northeastern United States, and across the Canadian border in Southern Quebec province.

I begin by acknowledging where we come from, both culturally and geographically, as this program, Indigenous Perspectives, focuses on

understanding our roots in Mother Earth and our connections with our ancestors.

Carolyn Schmidt: Today's topic is Shamanism, and our guest is Sas Carey of Vermont. Sas is a healer and a registered nurse who, since 1994, has been traveling to Mongolia studying traditional Mongolian medicine. She became close to a small ethnic group of reindeer herders, and has returned often over nearly three decades. Shamanism is an important part of traditional Mongolian culture, and Sas has attended and participated in shaman ceremonies.

She has published a book, *Reindeer Herders in My Heart*, which is available in English, Mongolian, and French. She has also made award-winning documentary films on nomadic life. Her non-profit organization, Nomadicare, was founded to support and preserve traditional Mongolian nomadic life. For disclosure of my connections to Sas and her work: I am an advisor on Nomadicare's board, and I'm also responsible as Nomadicare's fiduciary agent for managing and reporting their tax deductible charitable donations. And now, Sas Carey, over to you.

Sas Carey: Okay! [*opens by singing a Dukha reindeer herders' song*].

This is a song in the Tuvan language, sung by the Dukha reindeer herders in Northern Mongolia, and even sometimes used for ceremonies for shamanism. It's about honoring their native land, which like many natives in the United States [*the Dukha*] have not been able to move freely from their land. And in Mongolia, the native Dukha people had a border put right between Mongolia and Russia, and it's a closed border. So they're not allowed to go back to their homeland. And this is a song about singing about their homeland and how beautiful it is if they look from above or below or beside, and how beautiful their land is that they miss, because of the way governments are.

So, do you have - are you going to ask questions, Carolyn?

Carolyn: You said that shamanism is the original religion of Mongolia, and obviously there's the tremendously deep cultural heritage that people are working today to maintain and pass on. Can you start by telling us your own definition of shamanism? and discuss how your understanding has grown out of your own experiences in Mongolia?

Sas Carey: What I see as the belief of shamanism is the belief that everything is alive and has a spirit, every blade of grass, every person, every tree, every - even every rock. And that, for that reason, there's a certain way of moving through life when you feel connected with everything and believe everything is alive.

The way shamanism works is, it's not an exotic experience for Mongolians. Almost every family has a shaman in their family. It sometimes skips generations, but that is the person that they go to for important questions in their lives and for help of their family and their animals. So it's not really a performance, and that's why people that are real shamans don't really even let foreigners come, or put them in the corner somewhere if they come to a ceremony. It's not a performance to be a shaman in Mongolia, with the people that I spend time with.

There are plenty of shamans that are new shamans. In fact, it was quite shocking to me about 10 years ago, because in 1990, the government became - had freedom of religion and wasn't under the *[Soviet]* socialist thumb anymore. And so suddenly all the shamans appeared in, in the capital of Ulaanbaatar, and there was a newspaper article that said 5,000 new shamans. And I really had ambivalent feelings about that.

Like maybe they've been waiting all these years from 1920 to 1990, and nobody in their family has taken over the role of the shaman. Or maybe some of them are interested in making money from foreigners and creating the exoticness of shamanism. So it's a very sort of secret kind of role that a person in the community takes and in the family takes, and it's not really advertised.

You have to be - you have to be there and they have to accept you. And it takes time before they'll let you in to the real shamans. In fact, I interviewed one person who was supposedly the best shaman in the west taiga, his name was Gosta. I interviewed him many times. I stayed in hisurts, or Siberian tipi. I talked to him - I mean, he jokingly called me his American wife - but I never saw a ceremony that he did. I never even saw his drum. So you can see that it's a very - it has a very deep kind of sense to it, that is part of the family and part of life. It's not - it's not a show for people. But of course there are people doing it the other way. And so it's - it pays to discern a bit, which one. I mean, to me, it's really a feeling in my heart or just an intuitive feeling if I think they're a real shaman or not.

Carolyn: Well this is fascinating because you've already teased out the whole idea that there's a lot of secrecy associated with it. So by definition, some of the most important elements are not ever going to be available to people who are outsiders. Yet it's also a question of - to me, I think part of the fascination with the idea of shamanism is that idea of making more connections with the spirit world. And can you tell us a bit about why these connections are particularly important to - well, to the people in Mongolia whom you know? And then, how shamans go about establishing those connections?

Sas: Yes. I know a number of shamans in Mongolia of different persuasions. I know Buryat shamans, and Darhad, and Dukha shamans, and they have their a little bit different ways, each one. The Buryat shamans have a whole ger, or yurt, that has artifacts in it, lots and lots of artifacts. One of their ancestors - who is an ancestor that they connect with a lot - was a herder. And so they have a little, almost like a diorama in their urts, or yurt, that has the five animals of Mongolia, the horses and the sheep and goats and [camels] and cows, and has those all represented. So there are a lot of parts that the Buryats have want to have right in their ger when they're calling their ancestors in.

So that's, that's one way, of course, with the reindeer herders, they live in an urts, or tipi. So they don't have a lot of little things around, but they do have what's called ongot. And that is symbols of the spirit, of the ancestors. They have those - that they have them literally in their altar, which is a lot of streaming, different colored ribbons, and mixed in there are their ongot, or spirit ancestors, and that helps to call them.

When they're ready to call their ancestors, they use the drum or the mouth harp, and they - for themselves to get into the trance usually they, I believe they use music and rhythm to get into that space. Whereas we know that other shamans around the world use ayahuasca or mushrooms or all kinds of different things. Sometimes even Mongolians use vodka during the service, during the ceremony, but it's just because the ancestor wants vodka or wants a smoke. So that they sort of sit there, the ancestor maybe stopped speaking. And then the shaman puts his or her hand out and says "I need" ; the other people, the wife, or the assistant knows what he wants, he or she wants. And so they give it to that person.

I've had shamans say to me - like Jura, a female shaman in Hövsgöl province, she's Darhad. And she said that she couldn't practice for a while because the spirits wanted her to drink vodka or, you know, do things that she felt were

unhealthy for her own body since they were coming into her body. And I've had other shamans say that to me too. In fact, one young woman who I interviewed once in Ulaanbaatar said she has been pressured to be a shaman, but she doesn't want to give up alcohol and her wild life, so she's putting it off!

But the thing that happens is if you're called to be a shaman - very often, this is what I heard from other people in Mongolia - very often, you have what's called the shaman disease. It could be a mental illness, or it could be wandering in the woods, or it could be, an internal problem, like Send, this one shaman who I know, had pancreatitis. I mean, it could be anything, but something that almost incapacitates them until they say yes, and they say, okay, I'll do it. And then things ease off and they're ready.

Carolyn: So is part of that the message that the process of becoming a shaman involves healing for the person involved, because they're making these connections ?

Sas: Often, I've heard that, that to be true. Yes. That those shaman diseases stop when the person says yes to it.

Carolyn: And can you talk a bit more about the role of the drum? I know that comes across in your movie, "Ceremony", that the drum is a very important part of the entire ceremony and calling - calling to the spirits and entering this world. Can you talk about that some more?

Sas: I think you just said it, you know, but yes, it's about the person, the physical person who is under the shaman, who's part of the shaman. I think it connects them. And what was it that Jura said in the movie? She said something like, you can use the mouth harp, , but it's like a colt - C.O. L. T. - it's just a little, little animal that will help you a little bit, but if you really want to go like riding a horse, you'd need a drum. That will take you the distance for the shaman to meet the ancestors.

Randy: So, the drum is animate. It is like a living being; it's not a "thing".

Sas: Yes. Yes. When I got my drum, it was so scary. And I have to tell you, it's still scary. I mean, I have not come to peace with my drum yet. I mean, I'm afraid to use it! Every once in a while I use it, but I haven't really come to peace with it, and I've had it about 10 years or more.

Carolyn: So is part of the fear about the power? Because one of the things that seems to come through with Mongolian shamanism is that a lot of these spirits on the other side have a strong, dangerous, dark side dimension. And they're not always friendly and happy to connect with the humans.

Sas Carey: Yes, definitely, they - the Mongolian people - definitely believe there are two sides. There's the white healing side and the dark - the dark sort of like cursing side, you know, cursing somebody, like I've heard lots of stories about that, how somebody turned somebody into ashes and then takes them to visit someone else and puts it in their food. And that person gets really sick or dies or something. I mean, so there is the really dark shamanic energy and the really light Shaman energy.

And mostly, of course, I try to be around the light shaman energy, but there's one young shaman I've been visiting in the last few years and he just gets so out of control. I think it was the last time I was in Mongolia in 2018. And actually they put me in this place of honor, which is - the whole ceremony is happening inside an urts or Siberian tipi.

So you can see it: it's about 20 feet in diameter and the stove is in the middle. And there are two assistants that are keeping the shaman from falling into the stove when he goes into a trance. And so the shaman is wild, this one. His name is Gala, and he's a very wild guy. And let's say his ancestors are wild! And they have him jumping all over the place, and just whipping that drum round, you know, the drums are about two and a half feet in diameter. They're big and heavy, and he's whipping it around. And then last time he actually threw it and it landed on my foot and it was - my foot hurt for like two months afterwards. Like it took me a long time to remember that he had done that, and that was why it hurt, but there really is a lot of energy coming through. Sometimes that's really intense.

Carolyn: Thank you so much. We need to take a break now and we'll return for our conversation about shamanism with Sas Carey, stay tuned.

## **Segment 2**

Randy Kritkausky: Welcome back to the second segment of Indigenous Perspectives. Our guest is Sas Carey, and we're discussing Shamanism in Mongolia. We're going to pick up the discussion, looking at the different experiences of different nomadic groups within Mongolia.

And I have to say that when I was introduced to this, Sas introduced me to a wonderful book called *Tragic Spirits*, and we'll put the link to that on our website, in the transcript. [*Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia. By Manduhai Buyandelger, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.*

<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/T/bo14941659.html>]

And this book - Sas, and you'll need to clarify for us - talks about the Buryats, which are a more remote group from where you worked and actually not geographically within Mongolia, but a distance from where you work. And one of the things that struck me as a historian is that the Buryats were exposed to a rather heavy dose of, you know, [*Soviet*] socialism and intolerance of religion and religious practice, which very much broke their relationship with their family trees and family records.

So a lot of the shamanic work there [*in the Buryat areas*] was about restoring those lost and forgotten connections and healing relationships with neglected ancestors who in some cases had their names forgotten, and they were sometimes a bit angry and took out their anger on their descendants. Can you describe these different variations within the nomadic groups in Mongolia?

Sas Carey: Yes. I can't really tell you exactly what the differences are because maybe they're subtle, maybe not. I have worked with the Buryat shamans, and they, interestingly enough, would channel their ancestors, you know, speak from that person. Like their voice would change and they would have a raspy old grandfather voice, and you could tell the person was really, really, really, really old and was coming through and wanted to tell things.

Now that that is not the way it was up in the taiga; in fact, in the taiga they weren't as open to the Soviets and the government coming to close them down. But as Nergui says in the movie, they had guards outside when they did ceremonies during the Soviet period, socialist period. And the Mongolian shamans, I've never really - they might, they do change their voice a bit, but it isn't to that extreme.

They, to me it's more like changing energy sometimes in one ceremony, there might be seven ancestors, but you can tell, I mean, I can tell 'cause I can feel the energy coming through: one might be calm and my one might be wild and one might be angry. And I mean, you can feel, and I can feel that kind of energy when I'm in the space with them, but they don't switch their voice.

And let me just say this from a personal standpoint, because I wanted to talk about becoming a shaman, too. And that is mostly always, as I mentioned, they have a shaman disease. Well, in 1985, I got a migraine and it lasted for 10 days and it didn't go away until somebody told me I was a channeller. So I've always been interested in - I've been doing healing and channelling, and I've been trying to understand, what, what was going on with the headache.

And when, as soon as I said, okay, and my friend told me what to do - that is talking to a tape recorder every morning for five years when I woke up in the morning. And, I started it, I thought of it as clearing out the rusty pipes so that I could have a direct channel. But there were times which I've been writing about in my memoir where other kinds of energy try to come in, like totally come in. So the shamans actually become a medium. They take on that whole energy, they lose their own self and they are someone else. When I do it, I channel it; I think of it almost like being pregnant with another energy, but I'm still there. So there are two kinds of energy going on. And I would say, I have a little more control of what comes out, because I'm still there watching.

So as far as becoming a shaman, these people - I have never met in Mongolia, one single person who wanted to be a shaman. I think that's a really key point for Westerners because Westerners are like, "Ooh, I want to be a shaman!" you know? And that I've never met [*among Mongolians*], never. They always say, oh boy, oh, you know, this is really hard. This is not what I - what I want to do. But I have to, to be alive and to be healthy. If they say no, they don't get healthy. And if, or they could even die from the shaman disease. So they know that and they go along as much as they can with it

Randy: In your film, which we'll talk about in another segment, you actually have wonderful documentation of a young man in the process of being an apprentice. Can you talk a little bit about that transition period between being notified - called -and learning the rituals of becoming a shaman?

Sas Carey: That young man was so interesting. His name is Oyunerdene. And he had epilepsy, which is another really important disease that many shamans in Mongolian have. So he had epilepsy from the time he was 12 years old. When he went to school his mother said, 'we had to go pick him up at school because he had such terrible seizures and headaches and just terrible things.' And so from that time to when we met him, when he was with his teacher Nergui, I think it was maybe 12 years and all those years, he was just learning about - from different people, how he needed to act. And even when Nergui



saw - in the ceremony that we watch in the movie - he spoke about three things that he [*Oyunerdene*] did wrong in the movie. And one of them was, he didn't have his mouth harp with him and his spiritual things that he should have with them all the time.

Randy: Well, we'll be coming back with our other segment to talk more about this marvelous movie documentary that you made. We need to take a break now and be back in a moment.

### **Segment 3**

Randy Kritkauskay: Sas! We're back with Sas Carey here talking about Shamanism in Mongolia, and we're going to pick up this theme of being a documentary filmmaker. So Sas, as we're talking, one of the things that strikes me is that in some ways your becoming a documentary filmmaker is a little bit like someone being called to be a shaman; you weren't born a filmmaker. So to put it in sort of spiritual terms, what, what called you to becoming a filmmaker? Why, what do you, what do you hope to attain?

Sas Carey: In 1997, I worked with the U.N. in a program called "Water Sanitation and Hygiene." And I met some women who lived in the Gobi desert. And we met with groups of people, and one of the questions we had for them was how much water do you use in a day? And they said, five liters! Five liters is like five quarts. They use that for cleaning, washing, drinking, cooking, everything - five liters of water. And that sat with me. When I came back to the United States, I was meditating on that thought of that's like one flush of a toilet in those days. That's all the water they used in the whole day. And I just had to go, I was just told to go and show the world how this is possible.

I, you know, I always took pictures and cameras and little tape here and there and things, but I was not a filmmaker and everything just magically came together. A cameraman who happened to be visiting his girlfriend, who I called, who was to be a translator- he was a filmmaker in New York City. And he said, he'd come with me. And I could pay him the rate of \$25 a day instead of \$600 a day like New York City. But anyway, he was just so fabulous, Joseph Spade, and funny and fun. And he really knew about filmmaking. Not I, I really didn't. I mean, I've shot pictures before, but didn't know too much.

So he brought his professional camera because he was making a movie there about the eagle hunters. So he had his camera and he was waiting for his team,

his crew to come to, to make his movie. So he said, sure, I'll go to the Gobi with you. And that's how it started. And he really helped me figure out how to do it.

And of course I do it so differently from Hollywood. We take pictures; we've an idea of something that we're doing, and then we interview people, but we mainly just are - what's called a "fly on the wall" technique. So you just have your camera there and they're just doing their life and we document it.

And the movie comes together in the editing room. I'm not directing people; I'm not saying, go over here, sit here, do this. I'm not choreographing it. I'm not telling them what to do at all. I remember what the Gobi women said, which made them laugh so much. Every time they do any work, we're going to shoot it. And then one day they came to my ger, and I was sweeping the floor and they said, oh, put the camera on her! Look, she's working!

So, but anyway, it kept going then when I started going to the taiga, I - being fascinated, I really am so interested in how - one of the questions that you asked before about connecting with the spirit world and that's what fascinates me about shamans. How do they do it? You know, I know how I do it, how do they do it? And so I - I was immediately drawn to find out everything I could, and get it down. And I made a little tiny seven minute film of those in 2003. And I showed it at a presentation. And one of the women, who became my producer, said "You need to go back. You need to make more movies. You need to do this." And people just - it just happened. I mean, but that's the way spiritual things happen. They happen.

Carolyn: Well, one of the particular things I appreciated about your film "Ceremony" with the shaman traditions was that you filmed it one summer and then you came back *[to Mongolia]* the following year, you showed the film to the people involved and they explained what was going on. Then those explanations - you know, to me that was an incredibly important layer of the film, but it involved a lot of trust and real relationships with the particular people you were filming. Can you explain about this process?

Sas: Well, you know, my program, Nomadicare, is - the whole purpose is to support and preserve the traditional nomadic life of Mongolia, through stories and films and health care. And so we started by doing health care and taking vitamins and hygiene kits to the reindeer herders. And every year we take them. Even this year in Covid, they've been delivered there or they're ready to be delivered. Some people have gotten them already. In fact, I have to say this

- yesterday, I got videos of them receiving their hygiene kits and vitamins. And there, it made me cry. 'Cause one after another, they said, thank you Sas so much. I really, we really appreciate you, still remembering us in the middle of Covid when you can't come 'cause the border's closed and all that. But anyway, they - so that's the kind of thing I feel it's a give and take with them.

You know, I listened to them, I give them healing. The shamans always asked me to do healings for them. And I try to give more than I take with the photographs and the filming. And I also try to be as unobtrusive as possible. You know, some people go in with great big, huge equipment. Like if you look at [*the film*] *The Eagle Huntress*, they had, I think a million dollars worth of equipment that they were using to shoot that film. And it became a famous Hollywood film, which mine are obviously not Hollywood films, but I'm trying not to interrupt their lives too much when I'm there and I'm trying to be respectful.

And one other thing I want to say about making movies is, if I had a choice of making a good movie or keeping them as friends, I would choose the friends and not the movie. So my movies are a little toned down - quite a bit toned down from action films than Hollywood. Well, to keep that wonderful connection with the people, the respect.

Randy: One of the things I really appreciate is that anthropologists often go in and then write up their interpretation of what people are doing. And the fact that you went back and said, "Here's what I recorded on film, now you tell me in your words". What you're doing has a level of respect and integrity. That is a standard that the entire profession of ethnographers, researchers, NGOs should aspire to. It's really a model. Thank you.

Carolyn: And with that, we are already at our time limit for this segment; stay tuned for segment four.

#### **Segment 4**

Randy Kritkausky: Welcome back to the final segment of *Indigenous Perspectives* and our guest, Sas Carey. Sas, let's continue talking about filmmaking. I know you had some important reflections on how films are received and made and how they record or sometimes slightly distort reality. Why don't you pick up on that theme?

Sas Carey: One thing that I was very surprised about was, I took the movie "Migration" back to - I always take all the movies back to the people that are in them. So the Gobi women have seen their movie, anyway, all of them, but with "Migration", I showed it in Tsagaannuur, which is the closest community. It's the center of the county, where kids go to school and they go shopping and they go banking and go to the hospital; all those things are in Tsagaannuur, and I showed it [*the film*] to the people of Tsagaannuur. And there were some Dukha reindeer herders in town, too.

The thing that amazed me was that those people [*the mainstream Mongolians*] who were their neighbors, who were in school with these people, basically marginalized them. They [*the mainstream Mongolians*] had no idea that they [*their Dukha neighbors*] had this absolutely beautiful lifestyle in the woods, you know, and in the taiga, that they were getting to see. And how everything fit together with them [*the Dukha*], with their reindeer, with their milking reindeer milk and just the food, and shamanism - everything fit together.

And the people in Tsagaannuur were quite surprised about that, which I had no clue about that. And the other thing that happened with "Migration" was, I showed it in a Siberian urts, or tipi, on my computer. And one of the people, herders, came up with his - he had a red flip cell phone that time. This was probably four years ago or so. He put it up next to my computer and I said, oh, don't worry. I can give you a DVD or something. And of course they don't have any way to watch a DVD. So he said, "No, no, that is my music from Tuva. And I need to learn it."

That's part of that separation that I talked about in the beginning, how they really don't have connection. And I was able to find music that the people allowed us to use. The Alash Ensemble - they allowed us to use their music in this, in our movie, and it was all their original music.

Carolyn: Let me clarify: as I'm understanding it, you're saying that because you had the music in the film, many of the nomadic peoples, and also the people in the city had not known of this part of their culture, and they were able to learn it from your film?

Sas: Almost, but not the people in the city. This is when I was with the reindeer herders, the Dukha, they had lost some of the music. They're familiar with it, they knew it, they recognized it, but they had lost it. And Baasankhuu, this herder, who has a fabulous voice, and he sings in my movie. He was the

one [who] said, "I just have to learn that; I need it on my phone. I need to learn this. This is part of my life."

So it was an amazing experience of sort of taking a culture back to people. - which I had no idea I was doing that. I mean, that's one of the things that happened sort of as a side effect of following the spirit in whatever you need to do.

Randy: So the Westerner who brought, originally, Western medicine to help people heal physically, ends up unexpectedly helping the people to heal spiritually very much in the spirit of the shamans reconnecting them with their culture and ancestry. Is that an unfair characterization?

Sas: Well, it seems a little bit more than what I do, but, it has been very, very heartwarming. That's why my book is called *Reindeer Herders in my Heart*, because it's just wonderful to - to be around them.

Randy: So just in the brief minute or two we have left in this segment, and this is a huge question: can you reflect a little bit on the degree to which shamanism is in fact accessible to those of us in the west? You know, is it a universal kind of a thing? Or, is it something really unique to nomadic people?

Sas: No, it's a universal. It - according to the Shaman Association in all Ulaanbaatar, every country in the world has had shamans. Like that is the basic religion of all people, where everything started - there.

Randy: And that's because it's all about the intimate connections with an animal world and our ancestors?

Sas: Yes. Yes.

Randy: I can relate to that as you know, that's what my - my book is about. And awakening to that connection is profound. Indeed.

Carolyn: So do you see the shamanic tradition among Mongolian nomadic peoples strengthening, as you've been working with them and learning from them?

Sas: I'm just going to talk about the Dukha reindeer herders, and it, it seems about even, I think. I mean, it's a little bit - it's possible to be a bit more open

about it. Some of the original shamans that I worked with, Gonzorig and Gosta, their nephew or - son and nephew is the main shaman, Gala, who I spoke about before. And I believe he connects with those two who were his ancestors, his father and his uncle.

Carolyn: Well, I think that's a great closing connection to make.

The contact information for Sas Carey: you can reach her and her works on [www.nomadicare.org](http://www.nomadicare.org). Her books and films are available, and her films are also available on Vimeo.

Sas, thank you so much for your insights and what you've learned from all your experiences and brought to us. Thank you very much.

Randy: Yes. Sas, migwetch [*thank you*] for expanding the scope of Indigenous Perspectives beyond the continental and Hawaiian boundaries of the US. And to our listeners, thank you for tuning in. I hope that this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, and perhaps even that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold on to it. And if you might write to me and let me know about your experience, I can be reached at [randykritkausky@hushmail.com](mailto:randykritkausky@hushmail.com), or through my website: [randykritkausky.com](http://randykritkausky.com).

Until the next show, goodbye and thanks.

For audio (56 minutes total)

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