

Joseph Campbell, the Seven Gods, John Denver and Tsaagan Sar: A Field Report From Khovd

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Tserenpil, my Mongolian teacher sleeps in the seat next to me as our Russian Antonov-24, a MIAT operated twin turboprop that looks like something out of an old Indiana Jones movie, groans toward its landing into Hovd. Tserenpil stirs as we thump along the runway and lurch to a screeching stop. We gather both our wits and our belongings as we exit the rear stairs of the plane into the bitter cold of a far western Mongolian February. I am immediately grateful for the cleaner, if not clean, air. I can't imagine how anyone can live a day breathing the thick bitter frozen soup of coal dust, dung-fire smoke, and bus exhaust that we left behind in Ulaanbaatar.

MIAT doesn't issue round-trip tickets for domestic flights and there's lots of confusion among my friends about when I should try to fly back to UB. Apparently the best plan is to keep your eyes open for a plane coming in for a landing, rush to the airport and see where it's headed in the hope there might be seats. It's best to do that at least a few days prior to your ticketed international flight, but I dread the thought of spending a minute more than necessary back in UB trying to breathe. Ultimately I decide to stay in Hovd for as long as possible, even if it means risking missing my flight back home.

Ganbold, Tserenpil's brother-in-law, drives us to his parent's home; an apartment in Hovd where full bore preparations for Tsaagan Sar are underway. Tonight is Bituun, the Mongolian equivalent of a Thanksgiving Dinner for two (for one!) and everyone, or at least everyone who is a woman, is cooking. The idea is to enter New Year's Day stuffed to the gills with food as a way of calling forth an energy of abundance for the entire year.

Huge piles of bread sprinkled with brightly colored candy and sugar cubes decorate the dining table, set for the 35 or so family members who are expected for dinner. I drink a bit of vodka, sample a slice of sheep's tail fat, watch a few minutes of wrestling on TV, and try to remember when I last slept.

Ganbold takes me back to his apartment where I set up my ThinkPad, HP color portable printer, and digital camera. Everything has survived transfer through the luggage compartments of three different airlines in working order. The ThinkPad and I have been to Mongolia before, for Naadam in Ulaanbaatar in 1999 and for Naadam in Hovd Som in 2000. But Naadam felt too organized, too full of other tourists, too easy. As far as I can tell, there are no tourists in Hovd in February, just two Mormon missionaries, a couple of Peace Corps workers, native Mongolians, and me. Tonight in Hovd at the beginning of Tsaagan Sar, I no longer feel like a tourist, I feel like a real Mongolian.

I dig through the rest of my luggage to discover I've left my snuff bottle back home in Indiana. Of all times and places to be without a snuff bottle! The exchanging snuff bottles is a key part of the Tsaagan Sar greeting ritual, and my feeling of being a "real"

Mongolian quickly fade. Still knowing that the ThinkPad and HP printer are working is a relief, and I immediately fall sound asleep on Ganbold's son's bed.

It's dark outside as we head back to Ganbold's parents' home for Bituun. We eat, and sing, and eat, and drink vodka, and eat, and watch wrestling on TV, and eat and then eat some more. But we don't touch the piles of bread. Apparently they are more for decoration than nourishment, at least for now. Mongolians must know more songs than all my friends in the US combined. With enough vodka, I almost believe I understand more of the words to the songs than one year's worth of Tserenpil's Mongolian language classes should allow.

The Mother of the Year sash Ganbold's mother won in 2001 hangs diagonally along a side wall. On the other wall are a few old photos of the family, including Ganbold's parents' wedding photo. Tomorrow I know I will be receiving gifts from the hosts of all of the homes we'll visit, and I want to have something to give back in return without causing offense. (The Tsaagan Sar tradition is for the host to give a gift to each of his visitors, not the other way around. In this way Tsaagan Sar is like Thanksgiving, New Year's and Halloween all rolled into one.)

I snap a quick digital image of each of the old family photos. Later in Ganbold's apartment, I remove scratches and stains, increase the contrast, balance the color, and print out copies to give to each of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren over the next few days. I become such a hit that other friends ask for copies of their photos until I run out of both photopaper and ink.

In Hovd, as well as in much of the countryside, Tsaagan Sar lasts a full five days. On day four, we head north and west in two old Russian jeeps into the mountains to spend the night with some distant cousins. We drive across frozen rivers, past a herd of winter-coated camels, and through snow drifts to two small gers set under a crystal-clear Altai mountain sky.

Apparently, there is no antifreeze in Hovd, so Ganbold drains all the water out of the jeeps. Tomorrow morning he'll use a kerosene blow torch to warm the gear box, and thaw the radiator enough to add fresh water.

It's here that I have my first taste of bashin, a smaller version of buutz, usually boiled rather than steamed. Maybe it's the fresh air, milk-vodka, or bitter cold, but I've never tasted anything better. I must have eaten two dozen, much to the delight of our hosts, who tell me they believe my presence in their home, from such a faraway place, is a blessing for their new year. One of them tells me I must be very brave to travel so far from America and asks if I am afraid that Osama Bin Laden will kill me, and all Americans.

Outside the ger, watching the sun grace the peaks of the snowcapped Altai, I am overwhelmed by both the physical beauty of this place and the generosity of the people who I have met here. I imagine that the two must be connected somehow.

The bitter cold sets into my bones even before the sun sets behind the Altai, but I am determined to see the constellations of the Mongolian winter sky, including the Seven Gods, or what I've always called the "Big Dipper." The difference in terminology for that one constellation I believe must reveal something profoundly richer about the worldview of the Mongolian herdsman compared to the worldview of the industrialized culture in which I was raised. I make a promise to myself to remember to call this constellation the Seven Gods and to remember this moment in Mongolia whenever I see them again.

All too quickly the cold drives me back inside the warm, humid, laughter-filled embrace of our host's ger. Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* that a hero's journey must return him to a symbolic womb, where he struggles with the meaning of his existence before experiencing a rebirth and renewed dedication to his journey. It seems to me this humid, candlelit ger may be as close as I will come to Campbell's uterine vision. All that's missing is the slow beat of a shaman's drum, the vodka-induced pounding in my head serving a workable substitute.

It's still early evening but while Ganbold, Tserenpil, and their cousins sing, play cards, and eat and drink in the flickering candlelight, I fall fast asleep among the shadows on one of the two iron beds. About 11 pm I wake to see our elderly hostess half asleep on the floor. I try to offer her her bed. My back is aching from the soft U-shaped mattress, and I imagine I'd prefer the floor, but she insists, and I quickly realize I owe her the gift of gratefully accepting her generosity. I let her know I will return to her bed after going outside for a few minutes. I want to see if the Seven Gods are still watching.

As I step outside, I am surprised both by how warm it is in the ger, and by how loud the snow sounds crunching under my boots. It seems to echo off the mountains, and perhaps even off the stars. I listen to the echo of the snow crunch again as I look up to see, and almost hear, the stars. I've never seen stars appear so close. The Seven Gods are there, still offering their unknowable celestial blessings.

My glasses fog up instantly as I step back inside the ger. I remove my coat, sweater, and some other clothing and settle in for the night. John Denver's old song about a young man "born in the summer of his 27th year, comin' home to a place he'd never been before" plays in my head. I am far from Denver's Rocky Mountains, and even farther from summer, but as corny as his lyric sounds, it is exactly how I feel. Halfway round the world, missing my parents, my wife and our four children, I feel perfectly at home in this "place I've never been before" -- welcome, warm, safe, well-fed. I feel as if it is a place that on some mysterious level I've never left.

“Amar bain uu?” (are you in peace?) they ask. Tiim, tiimmm – (yes, yes indeed!) But only now do I experience the full meaning of my answer -- a depth of peace I never knew existed until I came home for Tsagaan Sar.