

Eco-Polyphony and Religious Juxtaposition in Ayurzana's Novels

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Abstract

This article examines the novels *The Shaman's Legend* (2010) and *Shugdën* (2012) by contemporary Mongolian writer G. Ayurzana through the combined perspectives of Buddhist philosophy, shamanic tradition, and ecocriticism. Building on Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, the paper introduces the concept of eco-polyphony to analyze how nature, religion, and society emerge as dialogic voices in Ayurzana's narratives. It also explores the theme of religious syncretism—the blending of Buddhist and shamanic worldviews—as a defining feature of the author's literary imagination. Close textual analysis shows how Buddhist notions of emptiness, shamanic theories of interacting worlds, and ecological ethics intertwine with narrative conflict and character development, producing a multi-centered dialogic field. The study argues that Ayurzana's works highlight the hybridization of religious and cultural traditions, critique social and ecological crises, and stage nature itself as an agentive voice within the polyphonic structure of the novel. By bringing non-Western literary traditions into ecocritical debate, this article contributes to expanding the theoretical scope of environmental humanities.

Keywords: eco-polyphony, Mongolian literature, Buddhism, shamanism, ecocriticism, environmental humanities

1. Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, ecocriticism has developed as an interdisciplinary field that examines the interconnections between nature, society, and literature (Rueckert, 1978; Buell, 1995; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Garrard, 2012). At the same time, Bakhtin's theory of polyphony (1981/2010; Holquist, 2002) has provided a framework for analyzing how multiple voices coexist within a single text, creating dialogic spaces where conflicting worldviews encounter one another.

In contemporary Mongolian literature, Buddhist thought, shamanic traditions, and ecological concerns increasingly intersect. G. Ayurzana's *The Shaman's Legend* and *Shugdën* exemplify this convergence at the levels of theme, narrative technique, and philosophical discourse. This article proposes the concept of **eco-polyphony** to analyze how these novels stage the coexistence of religious, ecological, and social voices, each influencing decisions, ethics, and subjectivity.

2. Methodology

This study applies close reading to Ayurzana's *The Shaman's Legend* (2010) and *Shugdën* (2012), focusing on passages where ecological, spiritual, and social dimensions intersect. Analysis proceeds on both the material and ideational levels: the agency of landscapes, spirits, and substances; and the dialogic interplay of Buddhist, shamanic, and social voices. The study situates these textual findings within ecocritical theory (Rueckert, 1978; Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012) and Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, drawing connections to recent comparative anthropological research.

3. Textual and Analytical Context

3.1 Dependent Origination and Interconnectedness

Modern literary studies increasingly emphasize the convergence of natural, social, and spiritual dimensions. Ecocriticism argues that nature should be seen not only as a setting but as an agentive participant with its own voice (Rueckert, 1978; Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012). Additionally, Bakhtin's concept of polyphony describes texts in which multiple voices coexist without being subordinated to a single authorial truth (Bakhtin, 1981/2010). Together, these frameworks enable us to conceptualize eco-polyphony.

The Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) teaches that phenomena do not exist independently but arise in mutual conditioning. Garfield (1995) has shown how the Buddhist concepts of

emptiness and dependent origination describe being not as isolated entities but as interdependent networks—a vision compatible with ecological theory. Loy (1997) reframes this as an “ethic of ecological interdependence,” while Keown (2007) identifies dependent origination as a foundation for environmental ethics.

The XIV Dalai Lama (2021) likewise emphasizes: “Things may appear as if they truly exist in themselves, but in reality, they arise only through dependence.” This is not only a philosophical statement but also a profound ontological teaching. Applied to Ayurzana’s works, dependent origination provides a theoretical basis for understanding eco-polyphony: in literature, nature, religion, and society can exist as dialogic voices within a shared field of interdependence

3.2 Shamanic Worldview and Ecological Interconnectedness

Traditional Mongolian shamanism emphasizes coexistence and interconnectedness. Sarangerel (2000) explains that in the shamanic worldview, the physical world is seen as alive and active; plants and animals are sentient and form part of an integrated living whole that includes the world of spirits and *Ongod*. An *ongod* is the spirit of a dead person, often one who was a shaman when living (Tkacz, 2002). Within this relational construct, human society is defined not as separate from the natural world, but as a continuation of it (Roche and Torri, 2021).

The role of the shaman is to mediate between human beings and other “ambiguous and ambivalent” entities (Hoppal, 2022). According to Shi (2023), the ultimate aim is to promote “coexistence and balance,” bringing together a profound respect for nature with personal agency and harmony among different realms. This framework acknowledges three interconnected worlds: the Upper World of benevolent spirits, the Lower World of malevolent beings, and the Middle World, where humans coexist with localized spirits (*savdag*) and the souls of the dead (Jacquemoud, 2021).

3.3 Shamanic Tradition and the Concept of Ongod (Spirits)

The essence of *ongod* and the process of their manifestation are vividly portrayed in G. Ayurzana’s novel *The Legend of the Shaman*. Inspired by the life of the renowned Buryat shaman Tseren, the work explores the mysteries of spirits, ritual practices, and inner illumination. Setting his novel on Rabbit Island along the western shores of Lake Baikal in Buryatia, Ayurzana skillfully depicts the coexistence of Buddhist and shamanic cosmologies through the character of Hagdai Shaman.

The narrative describes how, following the collapse of the Soviet regime, the island’s shamans retrieved their hidden drums and staffs to summon the spirits once again. When a young Mongolian man named Tengis arrives at Lake Baikal, he is overwhelmed by an intense sense of joy and transcendence, eventually losing consciousness under the landscape’s profound spiritual energy. This moment signifies that the natural world is far broader and deeper than traditionally understood by Western scientific frameworks, exerting powerful influence on the human psyche and spirituality. The world around us is not merely a visible subject but also an “affecting” and speaking agent—echoing the shamanic principle of continuity between worlds. In this way, *The Legend of the Shaman* portrays nature, animals, plants, and invisible beings as active participants within the narrative’s dialogic field.

When Tengis regains consciousness, the figure leaning over him is Hagdai Shaman. Soon, after befriending a Canadian researcher and visiting Hagdai’s dwelling, Tengis becomes fully immersed in the shamanic tradition. As Hagdai shares his experiences, Tengis initially struggles to believe his extraordinary accounts; however, an inner yearning awakens in him—to glimpse the hidden realm accessible only through the power of the *ongod*. Hagdai tells him:

“I have known you for several generations, and I recognized you the moment you fell near Burkhan Rock, struck by the current of the spirits... For now, you only have eyes to see the dust of the spirits. One day, you will see their true essence. Will you stay? Will you be my *tulmaash* until you can perceive the true nature of the *Ongod*?” (Ayurzana, 2010, p. 24).

Thus, Tengis remains as his *tulmaash*. Hagdai explains: “A *tulmaash* is a second shaman—one who perceives the world through the same eyes.” He continues: “The signs of the spirits are not of this world’s language. They do not follow the logic of our time. When the spirits arrive, the shaman’s mind departs from this reality. They begin to speak in ancient, future, foreign, or even non-human tongues without conscious awareness. Only a true shaman can gather meaningful knowledge from that hidden world and translate it into human speech. For instance, if a bird spirit enters a shaman’s body, the shaman understands the language of the bird as though it were their own native tongue.”

Historically, the term *tulmaash* is **derived from** the Buryat dialectal form of the archaic Russian word *tolmach* (“interpreter”). The shaman serves as the mediator between the *Ongod* and the human world, while the *tulmaash* connects the words of the shaman—whose mind has transcended this reality—to the people.

A **significant** episode occurs on the night Tengis first performs his duties. An elderly woman seeks Hagdai’s help, fearing for her daughter’s life. Hagdai instructs Tengis:

“They might come as two or three. You will recognize them—the dogs will start barking. But once they enter my body, the dogs will fall silent and begin to whine softly. From that moment, hold my left hand... listen and repeat my words.”

Unable to cross the lake at night, Hagdai performs the ritual from the shore. Beside a bonfire, he calls his dog Sagaanai and begins to drum. The rhythm grows faster, breaking the silence; birds shriek, and Sagaanai barks toward the fire. As the deep resonance intensifies, Tengis’s skin tingles, his eyes fill with tears, and he feels the blood rushing through his veins as if a wind were blowing through his mind. Then, faint, shadowy figures appear above the flames.

As the shaman collapses, Tengis lunges forward to grasp Hagdai’s left hand (p. 28). The spirit begins to search for the girl’s dwelling, and the *tulmaash* repeats the shaman’s utterances.

Hagdai mutters:

“I have found her. Why is there a candle beside her? Her throat is parched... her vital fire (*amin gal*) has drifted away. Place my mirror on her heart!”

He feels the ritual mirror as if blind and commands:

“Blow out the candle! The mirror on her chest!”

Suddenly, he cries:

“Haay! Catch that fire—now!”

Sagaanai whimpers as a shadow in the shape of a dog snatches a blue flame from the bonfire and runs away. The shaman stretches toward the sky, shouting from the depths of his chest (p. 32). The driver then exclaims—the girl has regained consciousness.

Hagdai warns:

“If a shaman enters the whirlpool of the dream world too deeply, they may be lost forever. That is why someone must always hold their hand—like an anchor—and remember their words.”

Ultimately, *The Legend of the Shaman* serves as a **hermeneutical exploration** of the syncretic relationship between Mongolian shamanism and Buddhist philosophy. It portrays the hidden world as accessible only through the “eye of wisdom” (*Ongod*), redefining shamanism as a visionary practice grounded in “prayer to the sky.” This depiction affirms the **agency of non-human voices**, situating spirits as active participants in the ecological and spiritual order. Ayurzana’s narrative thus resonates with global discourses on spiritual ecology, such as Zorbas’s (2024) research on Siberian “dark agencies,” revealing a shared recognition of more-than-human agency within contemporary eco-philosophy.

3.4 The Intersection of Shamanism and Buddhism in Legend of the Shaman

Rooted in the author’s ethnographic research in Buryatia and his encounter with the shaman Tseren, the narrative functions as an allegory for the pursuit of enlightenment and the awakening of inner wisdom. The text posits several key narrative elements:

- **Divergent yet Parallel Cosmologies:** Through Hagdai and his assistant Tengis, the novel delineates the theological distinctions between shamanic rituals and *Shariin shajin* (Yellow Hat Buddhism). Tengis’s six-year isolation on Tuulait Island symbolizes a period of deep cognitive realization regarding these differing spiritual paths.
- **The Nature of Spiritual Vision:** Hagdai Shaman is presented as a figure who transcends physical limitations to alleviate human suffering. The novel argues that the “hidden world” is accessible only through the “eye of wisdom” (*Ongod*), redefining shamanism as a visionary practice involved in “prayer to the sky”.
- **Karma and Awakening:** Ayurzana frames both traditions as vehicles for spiritual awakening, emphasizing the role of karma and the necessity of introspection.

Through the character of the shaman Hagdai, the novel interweaves Buddhist and shamanic cosmologies. Hagdai explains that the signs of the spirits are given in languages not of this world:

“When the spirits arrive, the shaman’s mind departs from our reality... Only a true shaman can gather meaningful knowledge from that secret world and translate it into human speech”.

This affirms the agency of non-human voices, situating spirits as participants in the ecological and spiritual order. Ayurzana’s critique that “false shamans and ignorant monks... obscure the truth” highlights corruption as a distortion of cosmological balance.

Reading alongside recent perspectives, such as Guzy's (2024) study in Odisha and Zorbas's (2024) research on Siberian "dark agencies," Ayurzana's narrative emerges as part of a global discourse recognizing the ecological agency of more-than-human actors. Ultimately, *Legend of the Shaman* and *Shugdën* (2012) demonstrate a profound engagement with introspective observation and the complex coexistence of Mongolia's religious traditions.

3.5 Buddhist Thought and the Language of Prophecy

Prophecy has long been a central motif in Mongolian Buddhist culture. Texts and oral traditions often portray enlightened masters who foresee signs of decline during degenerate times. In *Shugdën*, Ayurzana includes the prophecy of Serdog lama:

“The sign of religion’s decline is when tricksters multiply and seekers of true knowledge are cast aside...”
(Ayurzana, 2012, p.125).

Here, Buddhist prophecy functions not only as religious foresight but also as social critique, warning of ethical decay and spiritual corruption. The Buddhist concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) reveals the transient nature of power, wealth, and human life. The novel *Shugdën* (G. Ayurzana, 2012) portrays the complex and often challenging revival of Mongolian Buddhism following its near-total eradication during the socialist regime. Through the mysterious death of the young monk Darambal and the strange events that subsequently befall his close companion, the monk Samand, the novel offers a nuanced allegory of the fragile spiritual and institutional reconstruction of Buddhism in contemporary Mongolia. The title itself—*Shugdën*—refers to a secret and controversial deity within Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhist esoteric practice, and is deeply symbolic: it reflects how the characters’ destinies and the events of the novel are subtly interwoven through hidden spiritual causes and karmic interdependence.

Central to the narrative is the idea that Buddhist ritual and esoteric practice maintain a living connection between the material and spiritual worlds, between the earth, the heavens, and the underworld. This is illustrated through a series of phenomenological episodes that blur the line between metaphysical forces and the natural world.

Upon being assigned to investigate Darambal's death, Officer Serdamba's renowned police dog dies suddenly and inexplicably on the very night of their arrival. In Mongolian Buddhism, there exists a specific funerary ritual known as “opening the golden box,” conducted by a specialist monk. This ritual reveals both the cause of the deceased's death and the details of their rebirth. In seeking the cause of his dog's death, Serdamba requests this ritual, only to discover that the late monk Darambal, lonely in the afterlife, had taken the dog with him as a form of karmic resolution.

Meanwhile, Samand enters Darambal's former residence to perform a soul-calming ritual, during which he recites the sutra of death. During this rite, Samand becomes aware that the secret deity had been privately invoked in that household. The novel thus underscores the hidden spiritual dangers that may accompany esoteric worship outside orthodox boundaries.

The narrative takes a darker turn as it is revealed that Darambal, having succumbed to the lure of material wealth during his lifetime, is destined to be reborn as a worm. Samand himself begins to suffer from intermittent episodes of unconsciousness due to the latent effects of the venom from a mythical naga serpent—a symbol of the unintended consequences of secret knowledge.

During one such episode, while Samand lies in a coma for three days, a devastating earthquake strikes the region where the deity was once invoked, suggesting a connection between spiritual imbalance and environmental catastrophe.

Upon regaining consciousness, Samand finds himself cared for by a young woman who turns out to be Darambal's younger sister. A tragic emotional entanglement follows as Samand falls in love with her, only to learn that she is already married and has a child. The culmination of the poison's slow effects ultimately leads to Samand's early death—an event that serves as a powerful metaphor for the Buddhist principle of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent origination: all phenomena arise in interdependence, and all actions bear consequence, whether seen or unseen.

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In *Shugdën* (2012), Ayurzana utilizes Buddhist prophecy as a mode of social critique. The narrative embodies *pratītyasamutpāda* through:

- **Karmic Interdependence:** The death of a police dog is revealed to be a karmic resolution linked to the late monk Darambal.
- **Phenomenological Agency:** Samand lama's coma coincides with a devastating earthquake, suggesting a profound link between spiritual imbalance and environmental catastrophe.

3.6 *The Breath of Words: Rhythm and Ecological Agency*

The extraordinary idea of “words that breathe” ecocriticism inspired us to extend comparisons in Buddhism. Analyzing the “breath of the word” in the literature seemed to be something to be the same as doing meditation. Buddha's major teaching leads people to great change by doing meditation that starts from observing breath. To plunge deeply into the internal world a person has to peer into internal dark corners of his or her own mind. Eco-analysis of literature must be undertaken at the intersection point between nature and humanity.

As noted by Professor Ch.Bilegsaikhan, (2003.) "Literature has become more associated with philosophy, deep reflection and meditation." Eastern traditions, from Vedic thought to Buddhism, emphasize the power of words as waves of energy.

Ayurzana's novel *Shugden* captures this through the scene where Samand lama learns of the “Naga-49” poison. His calm acceptance of death conveys that breath itself is not merely biological but ecological—an expression of human inseparability from the environment. Here, language carries rhythm and resonance that embody ecological agency. Nature appears not only as a backdrop but as a participant whose “breath” shapes the unfolding of narrative events. Thus, the novel demonstrates how ecological agency and linguistic rhythm converge to make words themselves part of eco-polyphony.

In *Shugden* we encounter a mysterious Buddhist relic that influences the human mind and real life. There are lots of metanarratives on the influence of relics on the nexus of the open and hidden worlds which are impossible to explain logically. The mysterious correlation between the human and non-human worlds talked about in the novel seems beyond ordinary understanding although essential to shamanism. Yet we recognize here that if someone uses the preaching of enlightenment for the wrong purpose, in the hands of hostile groups it becomes a weapon of mutual destruction. There exist so-called “secret tantric rules” in Buddhism, containing various phrases with symbolic, double and hidden meanings. As Lama Govinda said, “it was adopted not on purpose to hide Buddhist secrets from intellectual people, but to avoid using them by stupid men as a self-destructing weapon”. (Anagarica Govinda. 1969)

Another subtle idea in this novel is that our ancestors' intellectual data have been kept in their native land, waiting for the moment to restore interrupted historical circuits and signaling to make updates in their memory. All this mysterious content of the novel is an exploration of a logical paradox and phenomena of religious belief. The paradoxical approach found throughout Ayurzana's work may be related to ecocriticism rooted in Buddhist philosophy.

Ayurzana's prose suggests that language itself carries a rhythm that embodies ecological agency. The “breath of the word” in his novels is akin to meditation, where a process starting from the observation of the breath plunges into the internal world.

- **Ecological Breath:** In *Shugdën*, Samand lama's calm acceptance of death conveys that breath is not merely biological but an expression of human inseparability from the environment.
- **Secret Knowledge:** The existence of “secret tantric rules” serves as a safeguard against the destructive use of enlightenment by "stupid men," as noted by Lama Govinda

3.7 *Society–Nature–Religion: The Knot of Eco-Polyphony*

The *Legend of the Shaman* also describes polyphony at the socio-political level. In the episode of the Tunk valley oil pipeline, corporate power collides with shamanic ritual. The shamanic protest, culminating in a blood ritual, disrupts the project, leading to its collapse and the conviction of the billionaire sponsor (Ayurzana, 2010, p.222).

Here, nature, spirits, and society all intervene as active voices in the narrative. The pipeline fails not only for legal or political reasons but also because the ritual summons ecological and spiritual agency. This exemplifies eco-polyphony: the convergence of religious, ecological, and social voices in shaping historical outcomes.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 *Dialogic Agency of Nature*

In both novels, nature is not treated merely as background or setting but as an active participant in the narrative. Through scenes such as Tengis's fainting at Lake Baikal or the collapse of the oil pipeline in the Tunk Valley,

nature appears to exert agency—affecting consciousness, shaping fate, and speaking through symbolic or physical phenomena. These events affirm the ecocritical perspective that nature possesses agentive force within the narrative structure. In addition, nature is not simply some ill-defined force, but is a network consisting of a variety of specific actors and influences.

4.2 *Interplay of Religious Discourses and Narrative Embodiment of Interconnectedness*

Ayurzana's novels construct a polyphony between shamanic and Buddhist worldviews. Prophetic visions, meditative insight, spirit possession, and the concept of emptiness all operate as spiritual modes of perception and critique. Rather than resolving these worldviews into a singular theological position, the texts present them as coexisting but contrasting voices, offering different responses to ecological and ethical crises. The result is an alternative to the western dualism of *either/or* and the promotion of a contextual *both/and*.

Building on the Buddhist principle of dependent origination and the shamanic belief in continuity between worlds, the novels demonstrate that the human, spiritual, and ecological realms are mutually embedded. This interdependence is dramatized through character development (e.g., Tengis's transformation into a *tulmaash*), cosmological imagery, and the invocation of ritual as a medium of environmental resistance. These results affirm that Ayurzana's fiction constructs a narrative space where the voices of nature, religion, and society form an inseparable whole.

4.3 *Cultural and Narrative Dimensions of Eco-Polyphony*

4.3.1 Shamanic Vision and Embodied Ecological Experience

Ayurzana's *Legend of the Shaman* presents the experience of ecological agency not as a metaphor but as a lived reality. Tengis's fainting at the sight of Lake Baikal is a moment of embodied transformation—where nature transcends its material form to become an “affective agent.” This experience recalls what Tim Ingold (2011) calls the “dwelling perspective,” in which the landscape is not an object to be observed but a field of relations in which the human body participates.

In this sense, Ayurzana's prose not only describes nature but also **performs it** through rhythm, breath, and silence, echoing the phenomenological turn in ecocriticism. The sensory intensity of Tengis's awakening—heat, light, vibration—creates an ecology of perception where the body itself becomes a medium of communication between worlds.

4.3.2 The Ontology of Ongod and Polyphonic Dialogue

The *Ongod* spirits in *The Legend of the Shaman* embody what Bruno Latour (2005) terms “actants”—entities that intervene and transform the course of events. They are not metaphors for emotion or belief but ontological participants within the novel's cosmology. In considering Ayurzana's polyphony, the resonances between the ancient worldview of shamanism and the modern *actor network theory*, derived initially from technology studies, are striking. When Hagdai declares that “the signs of the spirits are not of this world's language,” he articulates a Bakhtinian logic of **polyphony beyond the human**, where multiple ontological registers coexist without hierarchy.

In this dialogic space, the *tulmaash* serves as both interpreter and witness, a liminal figure mediating between realms. The dynamic between Hagdai and Tengis thus mirrors the dialogic relationship between shamanic and Buddhist worldviews—neither fully subsuming the other, but coexisting through tension and translation.

4.3.3 Buddhist Prophecy as Ecological Allegory

The prophetic vision in *Shugdën* expands Buddhist cosmology into ecological allegory. The collapse of balance between the spiritual and natural realms manifests through physical catastrophe: the earthquake that coincides with Samand lama's coma signifies the karmic reverberation of human moral imbalance.

Here, prophecy operates in a way which Lawrence Buell (1995) terms “ethical imagination”—a way of perceiving environmental crises through moral and spiritual dimensions. By aligning Buddhist prophecy with ecological consciousness, Ayurzana reframes the post-socialist moral void as a degradation which is both spiritual and environmental.

4.3.4 The Language of Breath and the Poetics of Consciousness

The concept of “words that breathe,” proposed by José Marrero Henriques (2015), is here interpreted at the intersection of Buddhist meditation and literary expression. In Buddhist philosophy, breath (*prāṇa*) signifies the flow of life and consciousness; in literary ecocriticism, rhythm and cadence gesture toward patterns of ecological interconnection. Ayurzana's writing captures this convergence by guiding the reader toward **contemplative insight**, a form of inward awareness closely associated with breath-centered meditation in Buddhist philosophy.

In this sense, reading is not merely an aesthetic activity but becomes analogous to meditative practice, directing attention inward and fostering reflective awareness.

Such inward orientation resonates with Eastern contemplative traditions, in which meditation functions as a pathway to deeper understanding and enlightenment rather than as a purely technical exercise. Language thus ceases to operate as a neutral vehicle of representation and instead emerges as an active participant in meaning-making, functioning within a shamanistic network of human and non-human entities.

This dynamic recalls Bilegsaikhan's (2003) observation regarding the close relationship between literature and meditation. In *Shugdën*, the motif of the Naga poison further literalizes this idea: breath, death, and enlightenment are interwoven as successive stages of purification. Samand lama's serene acceptance of mortality transforms the act of dying into a realization of ecological unity, where individual existence dissolves into a wider web of interdependence.

5. Conclusion

Ayurzana's novels *The Shaman's Legend* and *Shugdën* represent unique contributions to world literature by interweaving Buddhist thought, shamanistic tradition, and ecological ethics into a polyphonic whole. Through prophecy, shamanic speech, and ecological imagery, the novels construct dialogic spaces where no single voice dominates. Nature emerges as an agentic participant, religion as a contested voice, and society as both problem and interlocutor. This eco-polyphonic reading expands ecocriticism by integrating non-Western ontological perspectives into the environmental humanities.

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