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# The Legend of the Almas: A Comparative and Critical Analysis

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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The Legend of the Almas: A Comparative and Critical Analysis

SIT Mongolia

Nathan Wenzel

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**Abstract**

The legend of the almas, the wildman of Mongolia, has a long history. The stories are primarily found in the western aimags of Mongolia. This paper investigates the presence of the almas as legend outside of its traditional western home. The almas has been thoroughly documented as a western phenomenon, but this paper seeks to discover how much of a presence it has in the wider culture, especially in central and eastern Mongolia where few, if any almas legends ever take place. This paper also explores what the almas means to different people. The stories about the almas can be thought of in two ways, as simply legends or as factual accounts of a living creature. In order to fully know and understand what the almas means, both perspectives must be taken into account. . First, the social meaning and use of the almas legends are explored in this paper. Then the history of almas sightings and evidence is documented and various explanations for its existence are examined. The almas stands at the crossroad of science and legend.

## **Introduction**

Whenever I first became interested in researching the almas, or wildman of Mongolia, I planned on going to the western aimags as many other researchers had done and following in their footsteps. I quickly began to realize that the stories from the west had been documented quite extensively and that going there would not really give me any information I could not find in books in Ulaanbaatar. I realized that the stories of the almas occur almost exclusively in the west, and I began to wonder if the almas was a cultural phenomenon outside of these areas. In order to explore the legend of the almas outside of its traditional home and to break some new ground in terms of research, I headed east instead of west.

I was not sure what to expect when I began this project. I had some limited knowledge of the almas before, but I knew nothing about the almas outside of its traditional western Mongolian home. I also only knew about the cryptozoological side of the almas and did not know much, if anything, about the legends and the meanings they might have for the people who tell them. I hypothesized that the almas might be portrayed or thought of differently or that it might not exist at all in the east. I also hypothesized that the scientific, often Western perspective was distinctly different from that of the Mongolians themselves. As this paper illustrates, I was not quite correct in either one of those hypotheses.

## **Methodology**

In order to complete this research project, I conducted interviews in Dadal, northern Khentii as well as in Ulaanbaatar. I also used written resources that I

found in Mongolia, both in English and Mongolian. A National Geographic documentary and some English-language internet resources also provided quality information. I chose to go to Dadal because it is a mountainous area with many hunters who had spent much time out in the mountains in the eastern part of Mongolia. If there were any almas stories to be found outside of the western aimags, I hoped to find them in the mountains of northern Khentii.

I spent eight days conducting interviews in and around Dadal. I chose not to use a tape recorder because I found that doing so often influenced the willingness of the interviewees to speak about the subject. After having tea and some bread, I began the interviews by introducing myself and my project and asking for permission to ask some questions about the almas. After they agreed, I used a conversational, flexible approach. I had a set list of questions I wanted answered, but I did not ask them all directly. Usually, I began by asking if the person had ever heard of an almas story near Dadal. After the usual negative response, I would ask if they knew of the almas or had heard any stories at all, even from the west. Then I would ask what came to mind when they heard the word “almas.” I would follow that question up with what they thought the almas might be, meaning possibly just a silly story, a living creature, or maybe some kind of monster.

Because the almas is a primarily western Mongolian legend, my interviews were usually quite short, and many people did not have much information.

I tried to let the people I was interviewing guide the conversation as much as

possible, and after I was done asking questions about the almas, allowed the interviewee to ask me any questions about my home or project. After one person early in the research process mentioned that he would rather his name not be used after he admitted to believing in the almas, I felt that I would likely get better and more honest results if I did not use people's names, so no names are used in this paper.

It is important to note that my research in Dadal was not a search for an actual living animal. Nearly all Western research involving the almas is in the field of cryptozoology, in which they consider the almas to be a living animal that needs to be discovered and documented. Had I wanted to conduct such a search, I would have gone to the western aimags. My fieldwork in Dadal was quite different. I was searching for and documenting evidence of almas legends (whether or not they have any basis in fact was irrelevant) that came from and took place in the east, outside of the traditional source area of these legends. I then used this fieldwork to analyze what the legends of the almas mean to different people and evaluated if and how the people of the east use the legend of the almas. Although this paper does include a section that considers the evidence and what the almas, if it was real, might be, it only does so because that aspect is also a significant part of the legends themselves and must be included in order for this project to be as comprehensive as possible. So while I discuss the evidence for the almas as a real animal, it was not the primary purpose of my research in Dadal.

In terms of analyzing the legends themselves, I had to rely mainly on ones



previously collected in sources I found in Mongolia. However, the interviews I conducted were the sole basis for my analysis of the legends as they exist in central and eastern Mongolia. In this paper, when I describe general aspects of the legends, I use the whole collection of stories in order to generalize, so I do not cite specific sources. Whenever I describe a specific story in order to provide an example, I do cite the source, but the general descriptions come from my own understanding gained by evaluating and dissecting the written and oral stories I collected during the course of my research.

Although my research seemed like it would be easy on paper, I encountered quite a few obstacles, from which I learned much about doing research in Mongolia. First, interviewing in people's homes is very time-consuming because you are considered a guest first and a researcher second. We could only begin after having tea, bread, and quite often a full meal, so we were always quite full after a day of interviewing. Second, interviewing elderly people who have a lot of stories to tell takes a long time because they often want to tell you their favorite stories, which might have nothing at all to do with the topic of research. Third, the answers people give need to be carefully evaluated because when you enter someone's home and ask them about something from their own culture, they feel like they have to give a good answer even if that means making it up. I got the impression from more than one interviewee that he or she did not know much about the almas but wanted to give me a satisfactory answer so just kept talking, which lengthened the interviews as well. I quickly learned that hoping to do more than two interviews per day was unreasonable because a single interview might

extend to two or three hours, including driving time to get there, time for greetings, eating and questions. Fourth, I learned that is easy for the interviewee to become the interviewer; several interviewees asked me more questions than I asked them. Fifth, I learned that a week or so in an area is not nearly enough time to get high quality results. Even spending the whole month of our independent study project time would not have been enough. Time and resource constraints became quite obvious once we were on-site. Mainly, I learned that fieldwork is far from simple. From finding and having to depend on a perhaps less-than-reliable driver to having to eat at every interview in a day, there are many things I did not consider but that I had to learn the hard way by actually going on my research expedition.

### **What Is The Almas?**

The almas is the wildman or ape-man of Mongolian legend. The almas is consistently described as a large, man-like creature between five and six and a half feet tall and weighing up to 500 pounds. The almas is always bi-pedal, meaning walking upright on two legs like a human. The almas is covered in thick, dark brown, reddish brown, yellowish, or black hair all over its body except for its hands and face, though they often have thick beards as well. The almas can appear as either male or female, with females having large, long, sometimes hairless breasts. The female almas is often portrayed throwing her breasts over her shoulders in order to run or move quickly. The face of the almas is similar to that of a human, but is also significantly different, with a large, protruding forehead or eyebrow ridges, and a wide and flat ape-like nose. The almas is often much

stronger than a human being, with large well-developed muscles all over its body. The almas is also said to have feet that are much wider and either longer or shorter than human feet.

According to the legends, the almas lives in the caves of remote, mountainous regions. Due to its strong, stocky body, the almas has incredible running, climbing, and swimming abilities, though some are afraid of water. The almas, like humans, is an omnivore with a wide diet consisting of anything from raw meat of small or large animals to fresh fruit or vegetables or even tree roots. Many of the legends also imply that the almas is nocturnal, as many of the stories occur at dusk or after nightfall. The almas' presence is often announced to people by its distinct, very strong, foul odor. They are also known to scream very loudly and distinctively. Almas normally appear alone and are solitary creatures. In many legends, female almas are even more dangerous and fierce than males whenever they or their children are threatened, and they often are portrayed with a strong maternal instinct.

The legends of the almas usually occur in a very specific location within Mongolia. Traditionally, western Mongolia, including the aimags of Khovd, Govi-Altai, and Bayan-Ulgii have been the source of nearly all of the almas legends. The Altai mountain range as well as the Tian Shen mountain pass on the border with China are fertile ground for almas legends. There have also been a much smaller number of stories emanating from the Gobi desert region. The central and eastern parts of the country do not normally have their own almas legends in which the action takes place in their own regions.

Although the legend of the almas is a Mongolian tradition, it is not exclusively found in Mongolia. Known as the almasty (the Russian pronunciation) and some other local names, legends with a creature of the exact same description as the almas are also found in the Pamir Mountain range and even further away in the Caucasus. People in these regions also have legends of the almas that are essentially the same as those found in Mongolia, making the legend of the almas a geographically international one.

Both within Mongolia as well as outside of Mongolia, the legend of the almas is not the product of a single ethnic group. Within Mongolia, almas stories can be found in the Khalk, Kazakh, and other ethnic groups. Though they may not produce their own stories, these people all are aware and familiar with the almas and at least some of the legends. Many quite small minority groups also live in the Khovd and Bayan-Ulgii aimags, so within Mongolia, the almas is not found in just one or even a few ethnic groups. Outside of Mongolia, the various ethnic groups that inhabit the Pamir Mountains and Caucasus, including Russians, Georgians, and others also have almas legends. The almas is therefore clearly not limited to a single ethnic group.

### **The Almas Among The Wildmen Stories Of The World**

The almas is a wildman figure. Nearly every region of the world has some variety of a wildman figure who is somewhat human or is somewhere in between animals and humans. Wildmen are usually either larger or smaller than a normal human, hairy all over their bodies, and inhabiting remote areas where people do

not live. There are two broad categories within the wildman story category: those legends containing a figure who is more ape-like and those with a figure who is more human-like. The North American Sasquatch and the Himalayan Yeti are figures generally described as being more like an ape than like a human. These figures are also normally described as much larger than a human. The Sumatran Orang Pendek is considered to be more human-like, but is described as being much smaller than a normal person. The almas, conversely, is normally described as looking more like a human than an ape. The scope of this paper is not wide enough to compare the social use and meaning of each of these different legends. This paper will, however, compare the physical traits of some of these wildmen to those of the almas and explore how unique the almas is at a basic level from other wildmen legends.

The almas and yeti are actually quite different even at a basic level. The yeti is found in the Himalayas and is described as larger and more ape-like than the almas (“Yeti”). The yeti is also reportedly much larger than the almas, with a height of up to nine meters and weight up to hundreds of kilograms (“Yeti”). The more ape-like yeti is also known for its cone-shaped head and sloping forehead (“Yeti”). Like the almas, however, the yeti is known for its great strength, upright walk, hair-covered body, and large feet (“Yeti”). One person I interviewed suggested that the almas and yeti were either the same creature or closely related (Interviewee 18). Despite the opinions of some people and the fact that the almas and yeti have some characteristics in common, they are distinct even at the basic, descriptive level.

Comparing the almas and the sasquatch yield similar results. The description of the sasquatch is nearly the same as the yeti. The sasquatch is said to be much more ape-like than human-like, standing 7-9 feet tall and weighing at least four hundred pounds (“Bigfoot“). The sasquatch is known for its large feet (hence the name bigfoot in some areas), as well as its strength, hair-covered body, distinctive pungent smell, upright walk, and pointed head (“Bigfoot“). The almas is therefore clearly quite different from the sasquatch, being much smaller and much more human-like.

The fact that the almas is different from wildmen geographically distant from Mongolia is not surprising. But the almas is also quite different from the relatively unknown wildman of China, the yeren. The yeren is usually described as an upright-walking, ape-like creature with reddish-brown hair that stands between six and nine feet tall (“Yeren“). Legends of the yeren are not as common as other wildmen, so less is known about it. However, it is said to live in the mountains of Hubei province at quite high elevations (“Yeren“). Unlike the almas, whose face and hands are hairless, the yeren is described as having a completely hair-covered face (“Yeren“). So the yeren is more similar to the sasquatch and the yeti, and quite distinct from the almas, which is always considered more human-like and smaller than these other wildmen.

The wildman of Sumatra, known as orang pendek, is distinct from the almas and the other wildmen as well. The orang pendek is described as a short, upright-walking creature between three and five feet tall (“Orang Pendek“). The orang pendek, like the almas, is said to be covered completely in hair except for

the face and hands, and is also said to look more like a human than an ape (“Orang Pendek”). However, the orang pendek is quite different from the almas in that it is much smaller than a human and often is spotted climbing trees in the thick jungle as opposed to living in high mountain caves (“Orang Pendek”).

Among today’s most common and well-known wildman legends, the almas is unique. It is distinct from the yeti, sasquatch, and orang pendek for a variety of reasons from appearance to size to habitat. The almas is one of the few wildmen consistently described as more like a human than an ape. Some wildmen such as those in Cambodia, Vietnam, and other Asian countries are occasionally described as being more human-like, but they are also just as often described as being more like apes (“Wildmen: America and Elsewhere”). The wildman of medieval Europe was considered to be simply a hairy human lacking civilization and thus similar to the description of the almas, but stories of the European wildman ended centuries ago and are no longer told today (“Wildmen: America and Elsewhere”). The almas is therefore quite unique among today’s wildman legends in that it is the one of very few to be consistently described as more like a human that has survived into the today’s world.

### **Why Do Stories Of The Almas Exist?**

Stories of the almas have different uses and reasons for existing within Mongolian society. While it is difficult to speak definitely about the purpose for these stories due to my limited study, I can describe some of its different portrayals and offer some insight into why these stories continue to exist in Mongolia today. The most common portrayal of the almas as some sort of

faceless monster or general boogeyman, and it is used as a method of instilling good behavior in children. Parents tell their children they will give them to the almas if they misbehave. Stories of people being attacked in certain areas or at night are a way for people to warn children not to go to those areas and to stay close to the ger after nightfall. The almas is a way for people to personify a fear or something considered bad in society. The almas is concrete enough to be a monster or boogeyman, but mysterious enough to be flexible and used by different people in different situations.

For example, there is one story in which a poor herder named Ukhana near the Altai mountains goes searching for his lost yak (Tumurdash 14). Near a particular quite steep mountain and a rocky ravine, he finds his half-eaten yak (Tumurdash 14). An almas appears and the two wrestle, falling down into the ravine (Tumurdash 14). The herder awakens to find his horse dead, and also partially eaten and the almas gone (Tumurdash 14). He then walks back to his home and warns everyone of the dangers of going near the mountain and ravine (Tumurdash 15). This story is a clear illustration of using an almas in order to keep people out of a certain, dangerous area. Parents would not want their children playing or going near a steep, rocky ravine where they could easily fall and injure themselves or a horse. The almas is thus often used as a psychological method of creating fear in order to encourage and enforce desirable behaviors.

A variation of the use of the almas to represent something feared involves people being kidnapped and physically changing to look like an almas themselves. For example, in 1925, an eighteen-year-old girl named Nadmid went



searching for the family's lost calves and did not return before dark (Tumurdash 16). Her family searched for her but there was no sign and it was assumed she was killed and eaten by wolves (Tumurdash 16). However, six years later a thin, decrepit woman appeared at her family's ger, covered in hair (Tumurdash 17). The woman claimed to be Nadmid and described how she had been kept captive by an almas (Tumurdash 17). She explained that being kept in a cave and living in the wild had turned her into a monster (Tumurdash 17). Her father believed that she was possessed and not really his daughter anymore, so he made her drink with him until she became unconscious and he was drunk (Tumurdash 17). He then killed her in drunken confusion because he believed that it was in her and the family's best interests (Tumurdash 18).

A similar story involves a young man named Samdan, who was 21 years old when he was kidnapped by a female almas in 1912 (Tumurdash 20). The almas took him to her cave and licked him every night until he grew a thick coat of hair, just like an almas (Interviewee 2). Eventually the almas became pregnant with Samdan's child, and almost a year later had the child (Interviewee 2). One night, the almas, which by now trusted Samdan, did not seal him inside the cave, so he escaped (Interviewee 2). When the almas realized he was gone, she chased after him holding their child, and stopped when she got to the lake Samdan had crossed because this almas was terrified of water (Tumurdash 24). In a fit of rage, the almas tore their child in half and threw its body into the lake (Interviewee 2). When Samdan returned to his home, he finally convinced his family that it was truly him, and a doctor helped remove his body hair with an herbal concoction

(Tumurdash 25). All the hair fell away except for the hair growing down his back, and because of this he was known as maned Samdan for the rest of his life

(Tumurdash 25).

Because these stories involve a young man and a young woman, it is possible that they are targeting this demographic. These stories might be a way to discourage young people from sneaking out for illicit meetings at night. Though these stories are intended to serve as a warning, it is impossible to definitively determine whether or not they are targeting young men and women in an effort to prevent any inappropriate behavior or contact due to the limited nature of this study and the few examples available. However, the age of the people being kidnapped and becoming hairy like an *almas* in these stories suggests this.

In my experience living in Mongolia, many Mongolian people still feel a deep connection with the environment and the natural world. The *almas* is often used in some legends to represent the natural world, untamed lands, or areas untouched by people. In these stories the *almas* is portrayed quite differently than those intended to scare people. In these legends, the *almas* is usually a sympathetic figure that is kidnapped, wounded, or killed by people. The message of these legends is less direct than those warning against certain behaviors. However it is still present and usually shows how humans ruin or damage the environment or nature.

For example, in a children's book called *The Last Almas* by Jamba Dashdondog that I discovered in a school in Dadal, northern Khentii, the *almas* is used to show how nature is often destroyed by human greed. In the story, a rich

man named Sa is leading a huge caravan near the Altai mountains. A small boy who is the grandson of his servant gets lost and is attacked by a snow leopard. An female almas comes to his rescue and begins to take care of him as if he were her own child. Eventually, she is heartbroken because the small boy misses his grandfather, so she returns him to his home. However, she continues to visit the ger every night, though she never goes in, and she brings gifts of gold, diamonds, and ibex and argali babies. The grandfather and grandson become quite rich, but Sa quickly becomes jealous. Sa therefore sets a trap for the unsuspecting almas, who does not think of the greed and jealousy of people. The grandfather and grandson then help the almas escape, which makes Sa look like a fool because he has invited people from all over the world to see his almas. Sa then decides to kidnap the young boy, and takes him to a mountain. On the mountain, he begins beating the boy, causing the almas to come to his rescue. She grabs the boy and takes him to safety, but Sa shoots her. Her death-cries start an avalanche, allowing the boy to escape, but ending the story of the almas.

This story portrays the almas as maternal, caring, and protective of the small boy she rescues. The grandson and grandfather are not greedy and so reap the benefits of having the almas as their guardian and friend. They also rescue the almas when she is kidnapped by the greedy Sa. While they receive the benefits, the jealousy of Sa eventually causes the death of the almas, which may represent how the greed of people often causes the degradation and destruction of the environment. While less direct in its message, this story can be interpreted to show how interactions between greedy, jealous people and the natural world often

end in destruction. It can also be interpreted as a more general lesson against being greedy and jealous. So while the environmental message is not entirely clear, there is a subtext that can be interpreted in such a way, especially considering the Mongolian connection with nature.

I received another example from an elderly man that I interviewed in Dadal. He at first flatly declared that he did not believe in the almas and considered it to be nothing but a story (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). His story occurred in either 1919 or 1920 right outside of Dadal, in which a lama was traveling through the area with 5 other men. On the way, the lama spotted and shot what appeared to be a female red deer, but he left it behind. Two of the men in his group, which had been traveling for five or six days, wanted to eat the meat from the animal, so they slipped behind to go back to the animal (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). When they arrived, the animal lying there was not a red deer, but a hairy, woman-like creature with long breasts (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). The man I interviewed heard this story from his best friend Jargal, who was in turn friends with one of the two men who found the creature (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). He then went on to say that he personally knows the descendants of the lama from the story (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). While the interviewee did not consider this to be an almas legend, the creature described matches the description of a typical almas. However, his explanation was that the creature was a manifestation of a spirit master of a local mountain or river (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15).

Before telling this story, the man talked extensively about his connection with nature and the importance of preserving both nature and the environment

(Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). He repeatedly stated that he believed hunters should not just shoot anything they see and that some things in nature are rare, unique, and sacred and should therefore not be killed (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). He also detailed how he had stopped his friends from shooting some magnificent creatures they had seen while hunting many times over the years (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). His environmental message was clearly stated before the story even began and he used the image of an almas to deliver it, which shows the flexibility of the almas in legends. His explanation was also the first time I had ever come across a connection between spirit masters and anything resembling an almas.

However, this man had a clearly-stated agenda; he strongly believed in protecting the environment and the fact that some animals should be killed while others should not be. He used the image of the almas that I was interested in hearing about to teach the lesson he was trying to impart to me. He claimed he did not believe in and could not describe an almas, yet he used the stereotypical image in his story that clearly had a moral I was supposed to learn. He believed that spirit masters had some connection with protecting nature, and used that fact to explain away his usage of the image of the almas in his story. So this story also had a deliberate environmental message, and the man used the almas to represent sacred aspects of nature in order to deliver his message.

Another use of the almas is as a sign of good luck, particularly among the Kazakh people of Bayan-Ulgii. Kazakh hunters believe that seeing an almas will bring good fortune. Because a sighting will bring luck, they honor the almas (Interviewee 7). An example occurred in the winter of 1815. A woman named

Almagul went outside her ger at dawn right into the arms of an almas, which ripped part of her dress completely off (Tumurdash 8). She dove back inside while her husband, Khebey, went out just in time to see the almas running away (Tumurdash 8). He didn't know what to think at first, but realized that it was a sign that Allah had blessed him and his life would become easier and better (Tumurdash 8). He immediately began praying and declared that neither he nor his wife could tell anyone what they had seen or else Allah would take the blessings away (Tumurdash 8). However, on his deathbed, the man did tell the story and it was passed down since then (Tumurdash 8-9).

### **Are Almas Legends Present Outside Of The West?**

A large part of my research was exploring the almas legends that could be found in the eastern part of the country, so I traveled to Dadal soum, in northern Khentii. I did not expect to find many local legends, if any. I interviewed mainly older men in the community who had been or still were hunters and who had spent much time over the years in the local mountains and forests and asked them if they or anyone they knew had ever heard of almas legends in their region. I received some interesting results. Most of the people told me that I was looking in the wrong place and that almas legends always take place in western Mongolia. However, they were aware of the almas and some of the stories behind it. Although the vast majority of people had never heard of an almas story that did not occur in the western aimags, one man knew of two stories that had happened near Dadal (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15), though he did not actually attribute these to the almas. Yet another man used the almas in order to scare his children into not

misbehaving, as his parents had done with him (Interviewee 10).. And a few others had nicknamed their old friend who sported a large beard and long hair “almas” (Interviewee 11).

My interviews thus yielded some interesting insights. Unfortunately, with a limited amount of time and resources in which to perform this study, it was impossible to have a larger, more widespread sample. So while I cannot speak for all of central and eastern Mongolia, I was able to draw some conclusions about the mountainous areas near Dadal. The people there do not have any almas legends of their own that take place in their own region. In fact, I only found two stories, both from the same man, that took place near Dadal, though he did not say that the creatures sighted were almases, but they did fit the common description. But I did find that the people in this area still use the idea of the almas and it still has some meaning to them. The almas is a versatile concept that people can shift and morph to meet their own needs and send their own messages.

One depiction is of a terrifying monster that is often used to deter children from misbehaving and to represent something bad or wrong. One man I interviewed described how he used the almas as a vague boogeyman character in order to scare his children when they misbehaved, just as his own parents had done (Interviewee 10), which suggests a tradition of using the idea of the almas as a monster. Of course, one example does not make a tradition and does not mean the almas is widely used outside of the western aimags. But it does show that there is at least one family who continue to use the idea of the almas in order to influence the behavior of their children in eastern Mongolia, nowhere near the

source of the almas legends, which I did not expect to find.

Even more surprising were the stories told by one old man that actually occurred near Dadal. I did not expect to find any stories that happened in the east. He used the hunting story about the lama in order to send his environmental message (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15), while the second consisted of a sighting of a naked, one-legged woman running through the forest (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). However upon further reflection, I suspect that he may have come up with these stories just to be able to say something. The first time I interviewed him he claimed he did not know about or believe in the almas (Interviewee 9 Nov. 12). The second time I interviewed him (two days later), he lectured me about the need to protect and preserve nature, and then proceeded to tell the stories using the image of the almas (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15). While he could have simply not remembered at first due to his very old age, he was also able to speak effortlessly about other subjects and seemed to really want to give me some kind of answer while also getting his message across. This man also complicated matters by openly stating he did not believe in almas and could not describe it, but he used the perfect, stereotypical image of the almas in his stories (Interviewee 9 Nov. 15), which I believe he did in order to get my attention so that I would grasp his message about the environment. So I cannot claim to have discovered an almas legend that occurred in the eastern part of the country, but I definitely found someone who used the image of the almas in order to send a message, which is not the same thing but still significant.

During the course of my research, therefore, I did not find any people who



told almas stories that occurred in central or eastern Mongolia and clearly attributed the happenings to an almas. So, while the almas is not necessarily a part of the folklore in the Dadal soum region as in the west, the image and idea of the almas is present and alive. People there can still find ways to incorporate it into their stories and beliefs, albeit in different ways than I expected to find.

They use the same imagery; a large, hairy, human-like creature is depicted by the people I spoke with. They also use this image in similar ways to the legends that come from the west. The almas is used by parents to scare children when they misbehave, so it is being used in the east as a monster and personification of fear and badness. However, the man who stated that he used the almas as a scary figure also was very quick to say that no almas legends had ever occurred in his area and that I should go to the west to find them. It is also clearly being used to represent the natural world and promote harmony with nature. The story told to me that occurred in near Dadal was a clear example of the image of the almas being used to send an environmental message. Although I suspect that this story was fabricated specifically for me, it still demonstrates that people in the east understand and can use the image and connotations of the almas in order to get their point across. My findings suggest that there are very few, if any, almas legends that come from central or eastern Mongolia. However, they also suggest that at least some of the people who live outside of the western aimags are familiar with the idea of the almas as a way to convey meaning through stories in various ways, including teaching lessons about right and wrong as well as promoting respect for the natural world.

## **The Almas As Fact: The History Of Sightings And Evidence**

While the first section of this paper discussed the idea of the almas within Mongolian legend, this section will show how it is thought of and portrayed by the people who think the almas exists as a real creature. Because the almas is thought of in many different ways, this perspective must therefore also be included in order to completely understand what the almas means. Among Western people, the almas is essentially exclusively thought of as a real animal that needs to be documented. In my experience, this is the only way in which the almas is thought of in the West, but this same perspective can also be found among some Mongolian, Russian, and other people, so it is not exclusively Western and does break down along any cultural lines.

Researchers, often primarily though not always from the West, who study and search for animals that are found in legends and are purported to exist but that have never been documented are known as cryptozoologists. They research any animal that occurs in legends around the world in order to prove that it did at one time or still currently exists as a living, breathing animal of some kind. Many cryptozoologists have thus taken an interest in the Mongolian almas and have undertaken expeditions with the goal of finding physical evidence of the almas. While these expeditions are a more recent phenomenon, occurring mainly since the fall of socialism in Mongolia, there is a long history of Western, Russian, and Mongolian fascination and documentation of creatures considered to be almases. In the following accounts, any creature whose description matched that commonly attributed to the almas of legend is for the sake of simplicity referred

to as an almas, though that does not necessarily mean all the stories are true and definitely refer to an almas.

The first scientifically recorded sighting by someone not from Mongolia occurred in the 1420's or 1430's, when a Bavarian man named Hans Schildtberger who was a prisoner of Tamerlane noted in his diary his observation of an almas that he described as a wild person that lived like an animal and that was covered in hair except for its hands and faces ("Almas"). He supposedly met two almas face-to-face when an unknown tribal leader presented the two creatures to the Khan as a gift ("Almas"). Nicholai Przewalski, who famously discovered the Przewalski horse in 1881, also observed what he described as "wildmen" in Mongolia in 1871 ("Living Ape-Men: The Almas of Central Asia."). In 1899, a Russian zoologist named K. A. Satunin spotted an almas in the Caucasus and described how it moved just like a human ("Living Ape-Men"). British archaeologist Myra Shackley also noted that Tibetan and Mongolian medical books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century both list the wildman as simply another animal from which to gather ingredients in order to cure illnesses ("Living Ape-Men"). According to the book, the meat of the almas can cure mental diseases as well as jaundice ("Russian Bigfoot").

The story of the almas as alleged fact continues into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1913, a Russian anatomy expert named Khakhlov presented his findings about the almas to the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences, but unfortunately his study has been lost forever ("Mongolian 'Wild Man' May Be Missing Link"). During the 1920's, yet another Russian researcher, Tysben Zhamtsarano, also conducted

an extensive study of almas evidence, but he was denounced for studying Mongolian culture and sent to the gulag when Josef Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union (“Almas”). In 1937, Dordji Meiren, then a member of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and previously an assistant to Zhamtsarano, claimed to have seen a almas skin being used as a ritual carpet by lamas at a monastery in the Gobi desert (“Russian Bigfoot”). According to his account, the skin had red, curly hairs, fingernails like a person, a hairless face, and long hair on the head (“Living Ape-Men”).

There were also many wartime sightings and interactions with the almas. In 1925 in the Pamir mountains, Russian soldiers had cornered rebels in a cave (“Russian Bigfoot”). However, there was an almas in the cave, which attacked the rebels one by one until one of the rebels managed to shoot and kill it (“Russian Bigfoot” The one surviving rebel showed the almas to Russian General Mikhail Stephanovitch Topilski, who described it in an official report (“Russian Bigfoot”). In 1940, a group of Mongolian soldiers saw what they thought to be saboteurs on the border area between China and Mongolia, so they opened fire (“Almasti and Kaptars of Russia and Mongolia”). Whenever they got closer to examine their victims, they realized they were not people at all but some unknown hominid species (“Almasti and Kaptars”). According to one man I interviewed as well as some English-language sources, an almas was captured by the Soviet army in 1941 and was thought to have been a possible German spy (Interviewee 1). Lt. Colonel Vazhgen S. Karapetian met the creature after his troops brought it to him, but realizing it was a wildman of some kind and faced with more pressing duties,

he simply left it in the hands of his subordinates and the creature was executed (“Almas“). According to a 1962 research report about the almas, a herder named Ishgin was traveling in a group of about sixty Mongolian and Kazakh people during the end of October, 1945 (Damdin). The larger group split up into smaller groups of three to ten people, and on the way Ishgin’s group ran across an almas (Damdin). According to Ishgin, who was interviewed by the author of the report, they captured the almas, thinking it was a possible spy, but that once it was in captivity, they could tell it was some sort of strange animal that never grew afraid despite their threats with guns and knives (Damdin). Because the group was in a hurry, they quickly ate and released the creature, which wandered off into the forest (Damdin).

There were more non-military encounters with alleged almases in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1963 a Russian pediatrician named Ivan Ivlov spotted a family of almases while traveling through the Altai mountains (“Living Ape-Men“). After this incident, he interviewed local children about the creatures he had seen because he believed they would be more open with him, and they revealed that they had seen almases many times (“Living Ape-Men“). Some of the children even claimed to have interacted with an almas (“Almas“). In 1957 a hydrologist at the Geographical Research Institute of Leningrad University named Alexander Georgievitch Pronin was mapping glaciers in the Pamir mountains and saw an almas on two separate occasions three days apart (“Living Ape-Men“). In 1980 a worker at an agricultural station at Bulgan found the body of a dead almas. Though not an almas sighting, there was potential evidence of

the almas found in 2003, when Sergey Semenov found a leg and foot of unknown origin at 3,500 meters in the Altai mountains (“Almas”). Further tests were unable to definitively identify the limb, but tests indicated it was several thousand years old (“Almas”). Also in 2003, woman was attacked by an almas while hiking in the Altai mountains but was saved when her male companion scared the almas away (“Almasti and Kaptars”).

Aside from these accounts, there is also the strange story of Zana. Zana was an alleged almas that was captured in Abkhazia, in the Caucasus, in 1850 (“Almas”). According to local legend, the villagers tried to dress her and feed her cooked meals, but she refused clothing and would only consume raw meat (“Russian Bigfoot”). She was passed on through several owners and was eventually taught to complete some very basic household chores (“Almasti and Kaptars”). Over the years, several village men took advantage of Zana, and she bore at least six children, with several dying in infancy and four surviving (“Almas”). The children were supposedly fairly normal, except for having exceptionally dark skin and being very physically strong; one son could reportedly lift a chair with a man sitting on it off of the ground using only his jaws (“Almasti and Kaptars”). The children were also supposedly much more intellectually developed than their mother, with one son becoming a pianist (“Almasti and Kaptars”). Zana is said to have died in the 1880’s, though her grandchildren were still alive and being studied in the 1960’s (“Living Ape-Men”).

The story of Zana and her children continue with the Institute of

Hominology and Igor Bourtsev, who has studied the almas for over thirty years (“Russian Bigfoot“). Among his collection of footprints, hair samples, and other evidence, are two skulls: one possibly belonging to Zana and one definitely belonging to her son Khwit (“Russian Bigfoot“). Bourtsev sent hair and bone samples as well as CT scan results of the skulls to the Human Origins Lab of New York University (“Russian Bigfoot“). The scientists at the Lab decided that the skulls were simply of human origin and that they contained no traces of unfamiliar DNA (“Russian Bigfoot“). However, another analysis by M.A. Kolodieva of the Moscow State Institute of Anthropology declared that the skull of Khwit was quite different the usual skulls of people from Abkhazia, that it had some ancient features, and merited further study (“Almasti and Kaptars“).

### **If The Almas Might Be Real, What Could It Be?**

These accounts that many cryptozoologists and other researchers consider to be true naturally lead to speculation about what the almas could be. Those people who believe the almas is nothing but a story have various explanations for what people are seeing in the mountains of Mongolia and Central Asia . According to one person I interviewed, these sightings could be explained by misidentification of existing animals (Interviewee 17). In particular, bears are known to stand upright and fit the description of a large, hairy animal, so simple misinterpretation could be the explanation (Interviewee 17). Another person noted that if someone saw an old man dressed in furs, sporting a long beard, they could mistake it for an almas (Interviewee 7). There was even a man in Dadal who was nicknamed “almas” because of his large beard and long hair (Interviewee 11).

However, many people who see these creatures are experienced hunters who are easily able to tell the difference between animals, and many people I interviewed noted that people do not just make up stories for no reason. So if people do not make up stories and these sightings cannot be explained as misidentifications, then what could the almas be?

Some scientists believe that almas sightings may be attributed to people with genetic disorders that render them physically and mentally different, which could account for excess body hair, enlarged jaws, and alleged lack of human intelligence (“Russian Bigfoot“). However, the consistency of the descriptions of these creatures and the large and widespread number of cases makes this explanation highly unlikely because there simply are not that many people with the same disorder that causes the exact same physical changes. Other scientists consider the almas to be more closely related to the yeti, and therefore more like an ape than a man (Damdin). They suggest that the yeti and almas are possibly surviving relic populations of Gigantopithecus, which was a large ape that is believed to be an ancestor of gorillas and orangutans and coexisted for a short time with modern humans. However, this flies in the face of the many people who clearly note that the creature they saw was more like a human than an ape. Mary Shackley, Bernard Heuvelmans, and Igor Bourtsev all believe that the almas could potentially be a surviving population of Neanderthals (“Almas” and “Russian Bigfoot“). Loren Coleman believes the almas to be yet another human ancestor, homo erectus (“Almas“).

There is clearly no consensus as to what the almas might actually be.



Some think it is just a story and that there are mundane explanations for sightings, such as misidentifying actual animals. Others believe it is some species of pre-human such as neanderthals that has existed much longer than previously thought by scientists. The speculation and theories about what it might be are now a significant part of the story of the almas. In order to get the most comprehensive idea of what the almas means to different people, one cannot ignore the perspective that considers the almas to be fact and not legend.

### **My Explanation For The Almas**

After completing this paper, my opinion on the question of the reality of the almas is that it definitely used to and possibly still does exist as a real creature. I think the most likely explanation is that the almas is a small, surviving group of Neanderthals or some other, possibly unknown, descendent of homo erectus. Neanderthals and possibly some other pre-human species were alive at the same time as modern humans before competition drove them to extinction. However, competition would force the less well-adapted groups into harsher territory where modern humans could not or did not want to live. This would explain why nearly all sightings of wildmen around the world come in largely uninhabited, harsh areas such as the Himalayas, the Altai mountains, the Caucasus, the mountains of Sumatra, the Pacific Northwest of the United States and much of northern Canada. Competition with modern humans pushed these other species to live in these areas, and only in the past few centuries have Europeans and Americans have started to explore such places. As they explored further, they have they met with stories from local people about “wildmen” and sightings became much more

common. While it is impossible to determine if these creatures are still alive today, they existed far beyond what scientists originally thought and influenced the folklore and oral histories of people around the world. I believe therefore that most wildmen legends from around the world are simply different or earlier branches of evolution that survived competition from modern humans by inhabiting the areas where humans could not easily follow.

Clearly, this is only one opinion and there are admittedly some possible criticisms of this theory. First, many would argue that if these creatures existed, we would find evidence of them in the fossil record or in the world today. My response would be that the fossil record is far from complete. Fossils can only be formed in specific conditions, which is why we only find a limited number of them and only in certain areas. These creatures live in areas where people rarely venture, let alone conduct detailed, large-scale, and lengthy excavations and studies. For example, the fossil record shows that the coelacanth, a prehistoric fish, went extinct 65 million years ago with the dinosaurs. However, because the fossils are in a hard to reach place, the sea floor, scientists did not find them. And then in 1938, the coelacanth was “rediscovered,” 65 million years after it was thought to gone extinct. Also, I would argue that evidence is available in the world today. As many of the people I interviewed said, people do not simply make up stories for no reason, let alone remarkably consistent stories even among people hundreds of miles away in different cultures. Footprints, hair and feces samples, photographs, and sightings are all evidence, just not the complete physical evidence that some people demand. While it is not irrefutable evidence

such as a complete, living specimen, it is still evidence, which can be found in relatively large and consistent quantities and therefore which cannot be completely ruled out.

Second, some would argue that it is impossible for such a large animal to exist in numbers large enough to sustain a breeding population without humans taking notice, and that a fish such as the coelacanth hiding in the ocean is quite different from a large land mammal. I would argue that it is quite possible because it has happened before. Before the twentieth century, the mountain gorilla was a large mammal that existed only in the myths of local tribes. During European colonization of Africa, explorers realized that the gorilla was not a myth and was recognized as a legitimate species only in 1902. There are other examples of creatures discovered in the twentieth century that do not appear in the fossil record at all, including the komodo dragon (discovered in 1910). Other animals were simply considered to be hoaxes by Western scientists despite the knowledge and stories of local people, including the giant panda (confirmed as not a hoax in 1869), Przewalski's Horse (confirmed in 1881), and even a grizzly-polar bear hybrid (confirmed in 2006). Even as late as the 1990's and 2000's, new and unknown tribes were being discovered in the Amazon rain forest who had never been in contact with the outside world, so if people can exist in unexplored places, why can't another large mammal? In even more extreme territory such as the mountain ranges or Asia or the unexplored wilderness of North America, there could easily be another large creature living under the noses of people.

A third possible criticism of this theory is that the habitats where these

creatures could potentially live could not sustain such large animals in terms of food and shelter. Clearly, not all the environments in which the almas is spotted could support such a population. However, the almas likely moves quite a bit in search of food and shelter, so seeing the almas while it is traveling in between more suitable habitats is possible. Also, some areas such as the Altai mountains are actually ideal habitats despite their desolate and harsh appearance. Previous researchers have noted that the Altai mountains would be an excellent habitat because there are many animals available as a food source during the entire year (Damdin). There is also a large variety of plants, berries, and roots (Damdin). During summer, there are many pure sources of running water and during winter there is plenty of clean ice (Damdin). The Altai mountains also contain many deep caves at very high elevations, ideal for an almas to potentially spend the winter or to hide from people. And finally, the Altai mountains are very difficult for people to get to and few, if any people, spend much time at high elevations, so the almas can easily hide from people (Damdin).

Some would also argue that because the almas appears in folklore and legends, it is merely a beast of fantasy without any basis in fact. However, I believe the converse is true; its existence in legend gives more credence to its existence in reality. Animals that people are afraid of, familiar with, or must interact with make the most appearances in legends and folklore. Wolves, bears, and other real animals are found in folklore, yet no one questions their existence based on this. The fact that the almas makes an appearance in legends alongside other real animals such as wolves means that people knew of the almas and had

some reasons for including it in their stories. An example is the medical text that lists almas meat as an ingredient to cure mental disease. Anthropologists have noted that every other animal in the entire book has been documented except the almas, so if a book contains thousands of real species as ingredients, why would it include a fake one? I believe that people had some experiences with and knowledge of a creature that fits the description of the almas, and they therefore included it in their legends and books alongside other animals they dealt with all the time such as wolves and bears.

It is my opinion therefore, that due to the legends and continued evidence in the form of sightings, footprints, and hair samples, it would be unreasonable for science to simply rule out the existence of an unknown creature. The proposed habitats are not truly explored or inhabited by people, so to claim to know everything about the animals that may or may not live there does not make sense. Also, mainstream scientists who are asked to evaluate evidence, such as footprints or skulls as in the case of Khwit, are biased against admitting the possible existence of the almas and other creatures like it. These scientists do not want to harm their reputations or careers, and the assumptions behind many of their human evolution and pre-historic theories would be ruined by admitting that creatures such as the almas exist. While it is my opinion that the almas does or at least until recently did exist, I can understand the skepticism of others. However, I do believe that science must remain open to the possibility of discovering a new species in areas that have not been thoroughly explored or inhabited. If science cannot be open to change based on objective evaluation of new and old evidence,

then science is failing in its mission to understand and document the world.

## **Conclusion**

When I started this project, I hypothesized that I would find different stories in the eastern part of Mongolia and that Western and Mongolian thoughts about the almas would be distinctly different. I was correct that there would be different ways of viewing the almas and different types of stories, but I was wrong in my categorizations. Instead of finding or disproving the existence of different almas stories in the east, I found that there are two different types of legends, those that are meant to teach some lesson and those that are considered factual accounts. These legends break down along the lines of how people view the almas, as fact or fiction. I also discovered that there is no clear Western versus Mongolian perspective on the almas. While the Western perspective essentially only considers the almas as fact, there are also Russian, Mongolian, and other researchers that also consider the almas to be fact. For example, one of my resources for this project was a study by a Mongolian researcher trying to prove the existence of the almas. My hypotheses were thus both quite wrong. Instead, I learned that inside Mongolia and outside of Mongolia, the almas can be thought of in two ways, as legend or as truth.

The legend of the almas can be thought of as existing in two distinct realms. In the first, the almas is nothing but a story. Its image and the connotations it brings are wielded by storytellers to send a variety of social messages. The legends of the almas stem from the western aimags. However, this version of the almas is still present in the east, where I did my fieldwork in and

around Dadal. My research suggests that people there are still able to use the almas in stories in order to send messages, despite the fact that there are no legends set in that area. In the second realm, the almas is an actual creature, roaming the mountains of western Mongolia. Instead of being used in stories to send messages in society, this almas is something real that people have and are still searching for. Physical evidence, sightings, and historical accounts are important because the ultimate goal for researchers in this realm is to prove that the almas does or at least did exist. The almas is not simply a story, nor is it just an ape-man running around in the mountains. The almas means different things to different people at different times, providing a nexus for researchers between the past and present and between science and myth.

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