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Points of Transition. Ovaa and the Ritual Remaking of  
Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner  
Asia, followed by Varia

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# Sacred heights in the topography of flatlands. *Ovaa* kurgans in the Kalmyk Buddhist landscape

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## Introduction

- 1 The cult of mountains and heights has been historically intrinsic to the religious and political life of the Kalmyks and widely obtains today, which may seem like a paradox if we think about their present-day location. While Tibet, traditionally regarded as the Buddhist motherland of the Kalmyks, is well-known for its verticality, being surrounded by the highest mountain ranges in the world, Kalmykia appears as its complete opposite in topographical terms. The republic of Kalmykia is situated in the low-lying steppe region in the southwest of Russia. Most of its territory (around 75 000 km<sup>2</sup>) comprises flatlands of the Caspian Depression, a below sea level region encompassing the northern part of the Caspian Sea. To the west lies the Kuma-Manych Depression, another low-lying area. Formerly a channel of the straight that connected the Caspian and Black Seas, it is defined (at least in Russian geography) as the natural boundary between Europe and Asia.
- 2 The Kalmyks are historically newcomers to these lands as their direct ancestors, Oirat Mongols, migrated to the northern Caspian region in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from the area roughly encompassing what today is the northern half of Xinjiang, western Mongolia and eastern Kazakhstan. The westernmost Mongol people and the only followers of Buddhism in the North Caucasus, not to mention their current geographical location between Europe and Asia in the most literal sense, the Kalmyks conceive of themselves as embodying the truly Eurasian ideals. The paradox of maintaining the worship of

mountains in the topography of their absence is perhaps another dimension of their historical, geographical, political and cultural situatedness “in-between”. As a Kalmyk artist and sculptor, Vladimir Vaskin, proudly exclaimed during our conversation:

We, Kalmyks, are not merely steppe dwellers. We are people of the mountains !

- 3 This topographical self-definition is simultaneously puzzling and integral to the Kalmyk understanding of their ethnic history and identity. Although they have been living in their present-day territory for almost four centuries<sup>1</sup>, they still regard themselves as somewhat “alien” (Rus. *prishlye*) to this locale. Their self-identification with and reverence for mountains is foremost connected with the Oirat period of Kalmyk history, reflecting their historical and cultural memories of the “ancestral homeland” in the vicinity of the mountain ranges of Altai, Hangai and Tianshan. The concept of “Altai” appears particularly significant in this regard. Regional scholars emphasize that in Kalmyk contemporary representations of history, “Altai” is not simply a geographical notion, but (*sic*) “the sacred marker, the ethnic code, and a mythologically and ideologically charged geopolitical image of the motherland” (Bicheev 2005, p. 33).
- 4 It comes as no surprise that there should be an abundance of sacred mountains in Altai, Mongolia or the Himalayas. The cult of heights in Inner Asia has received an extensive coverage in anthropological literature (e.g. Snelling 1983; Macdonald 1997; Huber 1999; Charleux 2015; McKay 2015). But what would come of such notions in the antithetical topography of flatlands, where even more or less prominent hills with distinct summits are virtually non-existent? Yet, there cannot be absolutely featureless landscapes, and to describe the Kalmyk steppe as such would be more than unfair. Among its vivid attributes is the abundance of barrows of earth scattered throughout the pristine steppe against the background of endless horizon – either standing separately on their own or arranged in groups from three to twelve, to even more. While some of these mounds are hardly visible, others can reach a height of up to 10 m. Resembling hills, somewhat roundish in shape, with a low-pitched roof and the outlines perhaps too symmetrical for a natural landform, these are ancient tumuli disguised as hills under earth and stones. Although similar burial structures are found throughout Eurasia, in the boundless and barren ambience of the Kalmyk landscape these ancient monuments become particularly conspicuous. In the context of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, they are generally defined by the term “kurgan”; presumably a word of Turkic origin, it was popularized by its use in Soviet archaeology. To estimate the exact number of kurgans in Kalmykia is highly problematic, if at all possible. While some sources insist on as great a number as 200 000, others suggest several tens of thousands dating back to different historical eras – from the early Bronze Age (from ca. 3000 BC) to the decline of the Golden Horde. Kalmykia is therefore touted as “a paradise for archaeologists”, with kurgans receiving great archaeological attention since the late 1920s (Kol'tsova & Mandzhiev 2016). However, this article is not devoted to archaeology or historical geography of the Caspian Depression, being rather an anthropological discussion of multiple conceptions and present-day discourses constructing burial mounds as geographical representations of the sacred geography and cosmology in the Kalmyk Buddhist landscape.
- 5 Before I proceed, the concept of “landscape” requires a closer attention as I need to explain what I mean by it, especially when this term is used with attributes such as “ritual” and “Buddhist”, and how it relates to what I refer to as “cosmology”. Although

the spatial dimension of the social world has been a major part of anthropological and sociological research, the word “landscape” has been used by scholars as a type of umbrella term for numerous forms of socially constructed spaces and spatial perceptions. What is often meant by “landscape” in social sciences comprises meanings, interpretations and values attributed by local people to their physical surroundings (e.g. Hirsch 1995; Humphrey 2001, p. 55; Filippucci 2016). Eric Hirsch begins his introduction to one of the first edited volumes scrutinizing the notion from anthropological perspectives with distinguishing between two routine ways in which “landscape” has been deployed by social scientists: as a “framing convention” depicting the background of one’s study and as something which is “produced through local practice”, both physically and conceptually (1995, pp. 1-2). Indeed, the role of practices as living activities has become instrumental in analysing landscapes in anthropological debates. Here I recall the insights of Tim Ingold when he, adopting what he calls a “dwelling perspective”, defines landscape as being constituted in the very process of living within it by the patterns of practices of its inhabitants, or what he terms “taskscape” (1993, p. 153; 1995). Modifying space, for Ingold, is inseparable from existing in it, with landscapes emerging as embodied and emplaced practices of living. Rejecting the binary oppositions between man and nature, mind and matter, or the inner world of mental images and the outer world of physical objects, he describes the landscape as an interactivity, or a process of mutual transformation; while being shaped through the incorporation of activities conducted in it, the landscape becomes an integral part of those who dwell therein and shapes them as well. Furthermore, the landscape producing practices cannot be confined to the activities of people, since animals, birds, insects, plants and other forces of the natural world continuously partake in the process of dwelling (Ingold 1993, p. 169). The landscape, which appears as a sort of conglomerate of lives within it, itself becomes an important actor in human lives and social relationships. In the context of Kalmyk cosmology, this idea of other than human multivocal agencies in the landscape receives particular significance, albeit with a twist, as Kalmyk “ritual geography” explicitly acknowledges landforms as much more than merely objects that humans act upon (an important issue to which I shall return).

- 6 The processual approach to landscape has received further theoretical development. Hirsch (1995, pp. 4-5), for instance, has redefined the concept as a “cultural process” relating “the two poles of the notion of landscape”, i.e. the foreground and the background, which correspond to what he calls “the two poles of experience in any cultural context”, or the foreground actuality of everyday life and the background potentiality of social existence. The landscape therefore has a transformative and contextual nature, being a realization of background potentialities (culturally specific ideals and shared conceptions of what should be) in the foreground of social reality (Hirsch 1995, p. 22). What appears particularly important in this approach for understanding the Kalmyk landscape is that the “purest” and hence the most effective form of potentiality, according to Hirsch, is “emptiness itself” (Hirsch 1995, p. 4). I suggest understanding “emptiness” here in its most literal sense – as a place marked by the absence of something, with the notion of “absence” being the defining component of “emptiness”. It may sound like a paradox, but manifest absences are in fact latent potentialities that can be effectively actualized in the social process of landscape making, particularly in case of sacred or ritual landscapes which are projections of cosmological orders. In this sense, maintaining the cult of mountains for centuries in

the topography of their absence, as is the case with the Kalmyks, no longer seems absurd or paradoxical. Absences can be filled in with all kinds of alternatives and representations. If we, following Peter Gow (1995, p. 44), define “representation” as “something which stands for something else in its absence”, it becomes apparent that representations require absences as for there to be a representation, the direct perception of things has to be denied. Besides the absence of the object represented, a representation entails, according to Gow, “a mode of fabrication and an element of fantasy”, and these are highly contextual and implicated in socio-cultural relations (Gow 1995, p. 44).

- 7 Being a social construct with culturally variable contents, the landscape is neither homogeneous nor static. It may have multiple varieties even within the same territory as different groups may attribute different meanings and values to the same surroundings, which has led Barbara Bender to argue that landscapes “are always subjective”, since the engagements with landscapes are “historically particular, imbricated in social relations and deeply political” (Bender 2002, p. 104). For this reason, a landscape can be a nexus, as well as a means, of competing claims and contestations. Studies have shown that there may be various configurations of a coexistence of different landscapes in the same country, in the same territory and even among the same cultural and ethnic group; such distinct but coexisting landscapes can overlap and complement one another, can be in confrontation or even mutually excluding, or one landscape can encapsulate another. Analysing radically different perceptions of their environment and contrasting ideas about landscape of the Buryats and Russians, who nevertheless have to coexist in the same country, Caroline Humphrey (2015), adopting the insights of the geographer Augustin Berque and the anthropologist Philippe Descola, argues that “landscape” results from the interaction of two distinct planes – the plane of geo-physical reality and that of human perception imputed with “a particular signification and affect”. The necessary integration of the two planes in order to produce a landscape happens by means of certain “perceptual models” of cultural representation that can be linked to physical objects. Accordingly, on the one hand, “landscape” is the result of a subjective and culturally specific experience of social perception, whether the subject is individual or collective, but on the other hand, it is inseparable from a given physical site. Humphrey suggests that it is “absence”, by which she means “a switch to another ‘optic’” resulting in a specific non-recognition or non-perception, that enables a coexistence of alternative, if not mutually excluding, landscapes. To apply this insight to the Kalmyk context – where an indifferent onlooker driving through the steppe would see a barely noticeable hill, an archaeologist would spot an ancient kurgan that can be excavated and explored, a devout Kalmyk Buddhist would venerate a sacred mount that should be left untouched. According to the perceptual mode of the latter, a mound transforms into an “excluded space” in the sense proposed by Nancy Munn (1996) – it is defined by prohibitions restricting one’s presence at that particular locale and is therefore also marked by the absence. In this sense, the Kalmyk ritual landscape deploys the potentiality of absences to create cosmologically significant sites, or in terms of Munn “negative spaces”. However, switching optical modes does not preclude from severe collisions and political contestations between alternative landscapes, as was the case in Soviet Kalmykia, another central issue of this article. Furthermore, for Humphrey (2015), landscapes not only involve specific perceptual schemas (which are definitely far from being limited to pictorial images and may mobilize other senses), but also represent

entire cosmologies “made up of political/military preoccupations, aesthetics and religious convictions”.

- 8 In what follows, I shall illustrate roles and agencies of burial mounds in the making of the Kalmyk Buddhist landscape, and by the latter I mean – taking into consideration the theoretical insights presented above – a conceptual and ritual modification of physical surroundings by means of actualizing the latent potentialities of “absences” in order to represent, or more correctly to re-enact, the cosmological order. Not intending to follow the process of integration of prehistoric burial grounds into Kalmyk ritual life diachronically, I shall focus on the post-Soviet context of religious and ethno-cultural renewal. The material introduced here is largely based on the field research conducted in the summer and autumn of 2018 and is centred on two “sacred kurgans” that have received great publicity in the republic.

## Terminological variance: *ovaa*, *tolga*, *ovoo* and *ovaa kurgan*

- 9 The ritually significant mounds came to be known in regional ethnographic literature and ritual practice under the compound and rather contested term *ovaa kurgans*. The word *ovaa*, which is the Kalmyk variant of the Mongol *ovoo*<sup>2</sup>, denotes a heap of stones, wood or soil erected in ritually significant places, such as on heights or at cross-roads, with a similar tradition of constructing ritual cairns widespread throughout Inner Asia. Besides “heap” or “pile”, the word *ovaa* also means “frontier” or “borderline” (Muniev 1977, p. 391). The two dictionary meanings point to the two major functions of these constructions. Although their role is more complex, scholars tend to emphasize the political and sacred aspects of these cairn-like edifices (Birtalan 1998; Sneath 2007; Davaa-Ochir 2008). While marking the territorial divisions of society, they are erected across Inner Asia foremost as sites for sacrifices to different categories of deities, including those perceived as abiding in various landforms which they protect (Kalm. *ezen*, Tib. *sa bdag*).
- 10 The construction of *ovoos* is undoubtedly connected with the cult of mountains and heights, being its manifestation and enactment (Heissig 1980, pp. 101-109; Lindahl 2010; Humphrey & Ujeed 2013, pp. 185-222). Usually conical in shape, the *ovoo* is meant to represent the summit of a mountain and substitute for it in certain ritual settings (Kværne 2015, pp. 172-173), for example, when the mountain peak is off limits, prohibited from reaching or absent altogether. The latter seems to be relevant for the Kalmyk case. In the context of the north Caspian flatlands, the significance of mountains historically attributed among the Mongols and the functions of the ritual heaps – an indispensable feature of the Inner Asian landscape – have been transmitted in Kalmykia to the steppe kurgans. Similarly to the Inner Asian sacred cairns, burial mounds dating from the periods much earlier than the Oirat migration to the Volga flatlands have come to be perceived as smaller copies and representations of mountains, being the highest points on the Kalmyk steppe and resembling natural heights in shape (Bakaeva 2009, p. 98; Sharaeva 2017, p. 45).
- 11 Kalmyks also use the word “head” (Kalm. *tolga*), to refer to the mounds<sup>3</sup>. Just as the head is the uppermost paramount part of the human body, kurgans are the uppermost landscape entities in Kalmyk settlements, both in terms of their spatial dimensions and

the politico-ritual meanings ascribed to them among the Kalmyks. Representing ancestral mountains, some mounds became the powerful foci of Kalmyk patrilineal territories. Before the Soviet period, every Kalmyk district, associated with one or several patrilineages, had its own sacred mound. It served as a marker of the clan territory and an important ritual site where calendar offerings were made. As the head lama of Orgakin Hurul, Baatr Elistaev, explained:

*Tolga* is a kurgan. It is a mound in the steppe. But *ovaa* is what is placed on its top, for example, a heap of stones or wood. (September 2018)

- 12 *Ovaa* as a ritual cairn, as opposed to a kurgan as a landform, serves as an indicator of that which is to be worshipped and protected. *Ovaa* kurgans, or *ovaa tolga*, are consequently those mounds that have been delineated as sacred sites and objects of regular veneration. There is also a widespread opinion in contemporary Kalmykia that the terms *ovaa* and *tolga* refer only to the mounds of earth and cannot be applied to the cairns of stone or wood, or *ovoo*, the latter being perceived as not historically typical of Kalmykia. As expressed by a local historian and ethnologist, Bemb Shantaev, in personal communication:

Kalmyks say *ovaa* to name kurgans, because kurgans have always performed the functions of *ovaa* here. The classical stone heaps like in Mongolia have never been spread in Kalmykia. It is only now that so-called professional Kalmyks begin to build them here. The absence of the stone cairns can be explained by the fact that there are no stones on the steppe. Since childhood, I have thought that *ovaa* is a mound, but not a cairn of stones. Neither do I remember it made of wood or tree branches. We do not have forests like in Buryatia; it is a different type of region. (November 2018)

- 13 Accordingly, the *ovaa* and *ovoo* are interpreted in this case as two distinct words denoting two different traditions, i.e. uniquely Kalmyk and a broader Mongol, respectively. Moreover, as is evident from the quotation, there is a growing controversy between those religious and political activists who try to promote the building of stone heaps in Kalmykia as a vivid pan-Mongol tradition and those who reject it as a non-Kalmyk post-Soviet imposition from Mongolia and Buryatia. Yet, such a sharp divide, at least between the terms, would appear to be unfounded, as the situation looks more complicated. On the one hand, *ovaa* and *ovoo/oboya* are alternative transliterations of the same term, which – as pointed out by scholars (Humphrey 1995, p. 146) – is polysemantic and can denote a ritual cairn, the venerated landform or site at which this cairn is placed and also the deities associated with the worshipped site marked by the cairn. This seems to be precisely the case with the Kalmyk terminology. On the other hand, despite the terminological genealogy and significant overlaps in ritual functions, I would still suggest making a distinction, at least for heuristic purposes, between *ovaa/ovoo* as a ritual cairn and *ovaa kurgan* as a worshipped landform which is simultaneously a tumulus and hence a man-made ritual construction.

## The *ovaa* kurgan as a microcosm: the universal centre and its invisible inhabitants

- 14 While some of the ritually significant mounds are physically distinguished by some sort of permanent structure, in other cases the ritual delineation of worshipped kurgans seems to be seasonal. Regional scholars describe a pre-revolutionary tradition of erecting wooden poles decorated with reeds and scarves on the barrows that

functioned as ancestral mounts of a given locale (Erdniev 1985, p. 230; Bakaeva 2009, p. 100). It was done during the annual ceremony of “sacrifice to the kurgan” (Kalm. *ovaa täklgn, tolga täklgn*), which involved making offerings at the site of a barrow. The practice of erecting wooden poles on kurgans still pertains among the Torghut Kalmyks living in Astrakhan Oblast; about 1 m in height and 15 cm in diameter, the pole must be made of coniferous wood, which is said to represent a tree and implies the idea of longevity and regeneration. After the worship, the pole remains on the mound. It is either redecorated or replaced with a new pole every year. It has been emphasized by my interlocutors that even locals of non-Kalmyk origin, e.g. Kazakhs, Tatars or Russians, know that a mound with a pole is a “special place” and usually do not go there (conversation with Bemb Shantaev, November 2018).

- 15 A vertical pole is indeed an indispensable element of the Inner Asian ritual cairns of different types – whether made of rocks, wood or earth, they are built around a central pole in the middle or have one in their vicinity (Humphrey 1995, p. 146). A charismatic Kalmyk lama from Tsagan Aman, Balji Nima, compared the pole of the *ovaa* with the “tree of life” (Tib. *srog shing*) – a central wooden pole covered by Buddhist texts – inside a stupa. According to his explanation, just as the “life force” (Tib. *srog*) of the stupa is concentrated in the “tree of life” representing the central channel in the body, the vitality and power of the *ovaa* is contained in its pole (cf. Wallace 2015, p. 231). He also emphasized that both the stupa and *ovaa*, and hence any given *ovaa* kurgan, represent Mount Meru, the centre of the universe in Buddhist cosmology<sup>4</sup>. Significantly, the notion of “centre” in this context implies the ideas of verticality and connection. Envisioned as a vertical pole or a pillar, the centre makes a link between earth and sky, establishing connection between distinct and perhaps otherwise separated cosmological realms (cf. Humphrey 1995, p. 142). Ritual actions performed at the site of *ovaa* are also aimed at recreating the “centre”, or *axis mundi*, and thereby re-enacting the joining of earth to sky. This joining is considered a prerequisite of ritual efficacy and cosmological fortune. As Lama Balji Nima meticulously explained:

At the *ovaa*, we make offerings to spirits. The *ovaa* connects us with the spirits of the earth and water, the fire and the sky, and with the spirits of our ancestors. I give them food by means of smoke and vapour from the ritual fire because spirits and deities feed on vapours. The smoke that rises from the fire is also a pillar. I pour melted butter or milk in the fire, some part of it evaporates – it goes up with the vapours, smoke and smell. Some part of it seeps into the earth – it goes down. A connection between the upper and the lower is thus being established, and it is important to achieve this balance. You see? We pour milk in the fire so that the vapours feed the spirits, and then the spirits absorb and carry the mantras we are reciting. In this way, the realms are also connected through the mantras. Only after this balance is established, I can ask the spirits to do something for me in return. Only then, they can help us. (interview, August 2012)

- 16 In this way, a mound is transformed into a sacred mount connecting the cosmological realms. Furthermore, the ritually modified kurgan itself becomes envisaged as a microcosm, a smaller bounded copy of the universe, and is also described in Kalmyk popular Buddhist discourse in terms of the tripartite cosmology: its top as the upper realm, the flanks as the middle and the foot as the underworld<sup>5</sup>. Each substratum of the cosmos is perceived as inhabited or visited by corresponding categories of visible and, importantly, invisible entities.
- 17 Constructing the landscape as swarming with innumerable non-physical beings who are guardian deities of a particular territory is integral to Kalmyk, Mongol or Tibetan

cosmologies – if it makes sense to make this distinction at this point – and is common throughout South and Central Asia. As I was told by Geshe Dugda, a now deceased Tibetan monk who lived and worked in Kalmykia, every square metre of the land and water is inhabited by some deity who protects his or her domain. Different classifications of territorial gods are known in Tibet and Mongolia (Samuel 1993, pp. 161-163; Wallace 2015). In Kalmykia, they have been roughly subdivided into the “owners of the earth” (Kalm. *hazrin ezen, sadak*) and the “owners of the water” (Kalm. *usn ezen, lu*). Both categories of beings are perceived as able to cause illness and calamities to those who pollute or intrude in their territory, while also granting well-being and prosperity if propitiated by means of proper behaviour and offerings. It is these entities that are said to have the power over rain and therefore perceived as able to provide water for pastures, which makes them important recipients of the offerings made at the site of kurgans. Asking for rain during hot seasons and for fecundity in general, including childbearing, has been among the principal meanings of the “sacrifice to the mound” (Kalm. *ovaa täklgn*), with kurgans functioning as central ritual sites in Kalmyk fertility cults.

- 18 The top of the *ovaa* kurgan represents the upper realm(s) of heavenly beings. Virtually equated with the summit of a sacred mountain, it is the area charged with holiness, to which even Tantric deities and Buddhas are said to be descending. Significantly, as will be shown later in the article, the height and dimensions of mounds do not seem to be of primary importance in the Kalmyk context, with sometimes hardly visible barrows serving as sacred heights. Women are traditionally prohibited from going up the kurgans, even up the lowest ones, and must perform all ritual actions at the foot. One common explanation for this taboo is that women are conceived of as closely connected with the underworld and tied to the earth because of their fertility and reproductive functions, being conventionally constructed as “impure”<sup>6</sup>. Numerous other taboos and ritual prescriptions govern daily behaviour and structuralize the space at the site of *ovaa* kurgans, an important question that I shall return to later. At this point, I should mention that not all Kalmyk groups strictly observe taboos for women, one example being a seasonal worship documented among Kalmyks living in what today is Astrakhan Oblast (personal communication, February 2020). Furthermore, local scholars (e.g. Sharaeva 2017, p. 45) describe the allegedly traditional Kalmyk ritual dance, called “libation” (Kalm. *tsatsal*), that was performed on kurgans by both young men and women; it involved numerous circumambulations and making libations of milk on the top of a mound, which explains its name<sup>7</sup>.
- 19 The main season for making offerings at the site of kurgans is the summer festival of Ürs Sar, which starts on the day of the full moon of the first summer month and lasts for a month<sup>8</sup>. In the nomad context, it indicated the movement from spring to summer pastures, with its annual celebrations aimed at procuring fertility and wealth. This season coincides with Vesak, the central Buddhist festival marking the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and entering *parinirvāṇa*. While the annual festival of Ürs Sar is a recurrent period of intersection of diverse religious meanings, an *ovaa* kurgan becomes a socio-spatial nexus connecting the cosmological realms and representing the hierarchical structure of the universe. Rites conducted at its site are addressed to the entities of all realms, from the underground dragons to the heavenly gods, including those who in Buddhist terms have left the cycle of rebirth altogether.

## Network of sacred heights: Mount Bogdo and Buddhicization of the mounds

- 20 I would like now to address a question of what one may term “ontological masterhood” in relation to the sacred mounds – i.e. who actually “owns” ovaа kurgans or “controls” them in terms of Kalmyk cosmology, or rather cosmopolitics. Adopting de la Cadena’s approach, I use the concept of “cosmopolitics” to refer to power relations and practices that “include nonhumans as actors in the political arena” (Cadena 2010). The idea of nonhumans in this context encompasses all aforementioned categories of invisible deities and entities conceived of as either abiding in the Kalmyk landscape, or perhaps occasionally visiting it. Negotiating the legitimate use of the local environment through establishing proper relations with the agents considered masters of the land, foremost by making offerings at kurgans, has been among the important cosmopolitical practices in Kalmykia (see Sneath 2014 for parallels in Mongolia). Yet, the question of ownership of the Kalmyk ritual landscape seems to present a certain degree of ambiguity among the local devotees and religious specialists, especially if we keep in mind the Mongol approach that a territory cannot have more than one sovereign (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013, p. 214).
- 21 One widely obtained opinion, also reiterated in the regional ethnographic literature (Bakaeva 2009), is that the owner of all mounds and the Caspian steppe in general is the White Old Man, or Tsagan Aava in Kalmyk (Cl. Mo. Čayan Ebügen; Cyr. Mo. Tsagan övgön), worshipped among the Mongols as a deity of long life and protector of nature and herds<sup>9</sup>. In pre-revolutionary Kalmykia, an essential element of seasonal rituals at the kurgans was a dough effigy of the White Old Man placed on the mound next to the wooden pole (Erdniev 1985, p. 230). This ritual element can be still observed in some areas. Although perceived as the master of the mounds, the main abode of the White Old Man in Kalmyk traditional imaginary is not the highest ovaа kurgan, as one may think, but Big Bogdo (in Kalmyk Bogd Uul, or “sacred mountain”), which is located 21 m below the sea level near Lake Baskunchak in Ahtubinsk region, now in Astrakhan Oblast<sup>10</sup>. It is the highest point and the only mountain – or more correctly, hill – in the Caspian Depression region; its height above the sea level is about 150 m, while its foot is situated 20 m below the sea level. It is also known as Singing Mountain due to natural sound effects created by the wind almost constantly blowing through numerous caves and sockets. Resembling huge honeycombs, these are located on the southwestern side of Bogdo, the largest cave being around 1,5 km long. The White Old Man is said to abide in one of these caves, having been basically assimilated with the hill. The site of the hill and the lake has traditionally been an important pilgrimage destination for the Kalmyks, particularly during Ürs Sar. Stones brought from Bogdo supposedly possess curative power and are used in ritual medicine for diagnosing, healing and making protective amulets. A spreading popular practice is to travel to the site of Bogdo on horseback in groups, as well as to organize meditational retreats in its “singing caves”.
- 22 According to a well-known Kalmyk myth, Mount Bogdo was brought from the “ancestral land” of the Kalmyks, with some variants specifying the Ural River and some indicating Tianshan mountains in Xinjiang as its origin. One popular version of this myth narrates that two monks were carrying it on their shoulders and when they almost reached their destination, one monk under the influence of a demon began to think lusty thoughts and therefore lost his ability to carry the holy hill, which became

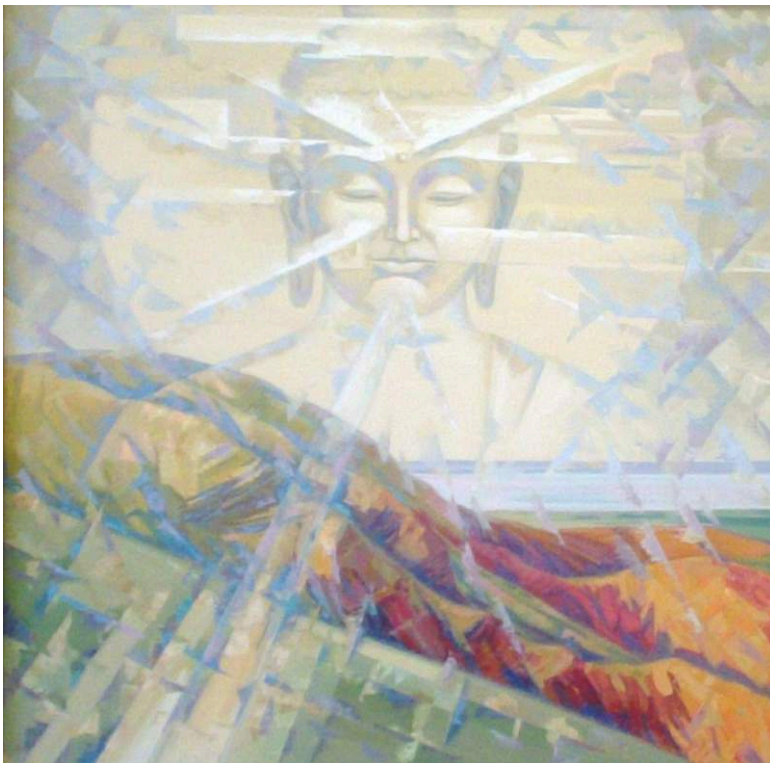
too heavy and crushed him. The monk died and his blood coloured one side of the hill red; for this reason, the northern side of Bogdo is red, while the southern side is white. The legend continues, revealing the origin of Lake Baskunchak. During one of his trips, the Dalai Lama decided to take a short rest near the hill Bogdo; having dined, he poured the leftovers of his soup on the ground, and in this way the salty lake Baskunchak was created (Basaev 2007, p. 205)<sup>11</sup>. This proximity of a sacred hill and a sacred lake may remind one of the trope of a landscape couple constituted by a mountain and a water source. Although common in Tibet and Mongolia (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013, p. 208; Kværne 2015; Charleux 2015, p. 55), I have not heard such interpretations in relation to Bogdo and Baskunchak. Another tale relates that Mount Bogdo was formed or (*sic*) “grew” from a stone brought from Tianshan by Oirats at the time of their migration to the northern Caspian region, while an alternative version of this story states that the stone was brought by Kalmyk pilgrims from Tibet. In geological terms, the hill does increase in height at least by 1 mm every year, its top being a dome of salt, and therefore can perhaps be described as “growing”.

- 23 The stories attached to the hill Bogdo, while intended foremost to explain how it came into being, portray the Kalmyk sacred Mount not as something static and invariable, but as volatile and highly active. It is singing, growing, talking, moving and being moved, and its current presence in Astrakhan is not necessarily permanent. The motives of mountains moving and flying through space, or transported from one place to another, are not rare in landscape myths of Mongolia (Empson 2011, pp. 31-33), with similar ideas found in Tibet, China and Japan (Buffetrille 1996). The Kalmyks have had a practice of bringing stones and earth from numinous sites, including worshipped mountains outside Kalmykia, to new pastures, thereby empowering new territories by connecting them to historically sacred sites (Bakaeva 2003, p. 207). The narratives centred on Mount Bogdo reflect the creative interface between the Kalmyks and their current physical surroundings. The position of Bogdo, the only hill amid the low-lying flatlands, can be treated as an allegory of the Kalmyk ethnic distinction from the neighbouring peoples of the North Caucasus and the Volga Region, and their historical, cultural and linguistic belonging to Inner Asia. However, there is surely more to the issue than this. I suggest that the stories attached to the hillock Bogdo tell us about the construction of a specific Kalmyk Buddhist landscape by subjugating an untamed space. Conceived of as a sacred mountain transported from the ancestral territories, Mount Bogdo is defined by contemporary religious experts as having a “special connection” with the mountain ranges of Siberia and Central Asia, and ultimately with the Himalayas and Tibet. Although portrayed in legends as volatile and mutable, Bogdo is said to be functioning as a structuralizing and stabilizing pillar of not only the Volga steppes, but (*sic*) of “the entire North Caucasus”, including its mountain system. This is how Lama Balji Nima describes the position and nature of the hillock:

I go to Bogdo every year to make offerings to the deities and spirits there, because it is the main mountain. It is the main energy centre that is holding the entire North Caucasus and it is cosmologically, and via its energy information [Rus. *energeticheskii-informatsionno*], connected with all sacred mountains of Central Asia, Altai and Tibet. The thing is that Bogdo is very powerful and has a very angry protective master. It is red. Remember, Valeria, if a mountain is red, it has a very wrathful deity. If a deity is wrathful, then all rituals must be done with precision, no mistakes can be made because if he does not like something, he will hit you hard. You know, people disappeared there. Many people disappeared there or were found dead!

24 To continue this line of thought, each *ovaa* kurgan on the Kalmyk steppe is part of a network of interconnected sacred heights with Mount Bogdo as its powerful focus, or “centre”. Again, the centre in this case does not imply being in the middle, since Bogdo is situated at the periphery of the Kalmyk region (which is no longer in the republic), but involves the idea of the principal structuralizing power in the landscape. It is its perceived connection with the sacred mountains of Altai and Tibet, as well as its highly wrathful and even aggressive disposition as is clear from the lama’s explanation, that enables it to keep the entire extensive region under control, despite its small size in comparison with the mountains of the North Caucasus. Similarly to the Kalmyk tradition of consecrating new pastures with stones and earth brought from distant sacred sites, the placing of the hillock Bogdo on the Volga steppe and its contact with the new ground enables a transmission of power and transforms the entire area into a specific ritual space. In this way, the low-lying flatlands are empowered and transformed into a system of ritual heights linked through the agency of its “energy centre” to the sacred geographies of Mongolia, Altai and Tibet (fig. 1). The idea of numinous sites forming one interconnected system that extends over great distances is typical of Mongolia, which is reflected in prayers recited at *ovoo* rituals (Evans & Humphrey 2003) and continues to receive additional interpretations in new religious discourses (Charleux 2015, pp. 53-54). What we have here is a case of landscape creation in the Tibetan Buddhist mode of an aggressive subjugation of the ground (Gyatso 1989; Schrempf 1994).

Figure 1. Mount Bogdo and Lake Baskunchak in the painting “Enlightenment” by V. Terehov, 2014



© Valeria Gazizova, September 2018, the Golden Temple of Buddha Śākyamuni, Elista; oral permission has been given

- 25 According to another interpretation, the owner of the Kalmyk land and all mounds is Zunkva Gegän, or Tsongkhapa (Tib. Tsong kha pa), the 14<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan monk Lobsang Drakpa (Tib. Blo bzang grags pa, 1357-1419) on whose teachings the Gelugpa order of Tibetan Buddhism was founded. Here the degree of Buddhicization, or institutionalization, of the landscape intensifies. The White Old Man functions in this interpretation only as the master of water and the lord of dragons (Kalm. Usn lu haani ezen), his sphere of influence having been reduced to the subterranean and aquatic, i.e. to the underworld. It seems hardly surprising that the ownership of the Kalmyk kurgans can be ascribed to Tsongkhapa, as Gelug has historically been the prevailing Buddhist order among the Kalmyks. I suggest, nevertheless, that both interpretations – whether it is Tsongkhapa or Tsagan Aava who is foregrounded as the sovereign of the mounds – reflect the process of Buddhicization or “taming”, if to use the Buddhist parlance, of the northern Caspian steppe. Although generally believed in Kalmykia to be a deity of an older pre-Buddhist origin and sometimes even positioned as opposed to Buddhism in certain religious groups (Gazizova 2018), the White Old Man has been a legitimate figure, albeit not enlightened, of the Buddhist pantheon among the Mongols at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Heissig 1980, p. 79). Making offerings to Tsagan Aava at the site of kurgans is therefore part and parcel of the Kalmyk Buddhist tradition. My field research also suggests that it is Buddhist ritual specialists that usually preside over the *ovaa* rituals in Kalmykia.
- 26 The question of the origin of the ritual cairns of Inner Asia and the extent to which their proliferation has been influenced by the intensification of Tibetan Buddhism among the Mongols beginning from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is frequently addressed, but is largely unanswered. Although often interpreted by regional activists as a much older tradition that with the establishment of Buddhism was integrated into the new religion (e.g. Sneath 2014, p. 460), scholars nevertheless tend to suggest that the cairn worship was less significant before the advent of Buddhism, if not absent at all (Atwood 2004, pp. 414-415; Lindahl 2010, p. 245; Charleux 2015, p. 26)<sup>12</sup>. While the origin of the *ovoo* remains unknown, the history of individual *ovaa* kurgans in Kalmykia or rather the history of their incorporation into the ritual landscape and sacred geography of the Kalmyks is often contained and passed on in legendary terms. I was told the following tale about the allegedly first *ovaa* ritual in Kalmykia:
- Once Tsagan Därk and Nogan Därk<sup>13</sup> were travelling from Shambhala, the land where gods and enlightened beings live, to the Dalai Lama’s palace in Tibet. In the middle of their journey, they took a short rest. After they left, a stream of fresh water welled up from the dry sandy earth near the kurgan to which they had descended, and tall trees grew around it in a single night. Monks from a nearby monastery conducted “worship” [Kalm. *ovaa täklgn*] there in honour of Tsagan Därk and Nogan Därk. This place received the name Ovaata, which means “having an *ovaa*”. The distance between the Potala Palace and Ovaata is the same as between Ovaata and Shambhala, only in the opposite direction. A footprint of one of them, a deep hollow in the ground, has survived to this day.
- 27 This legend connects the *ovaa* veneration and its origin, at least in the Kalmyk landscape, with Buddhism as the first *ovaa* worship is said to have been conducted by Buddhist monks in honour of White and Green Tārās, i.e. the central female figures of the Buddhist pantheon, on the mound which they had visited. It also reiterates the universal motive of gods or rulers of celestial origin (in our case female bodhisattvas) descending on top of a mountain (Kværne 2015, p. 167), but in the Kalmyk context on a

mound as a substitute for a mountain. Moreover, the story reinforces the idea of the *ovaa* kurgans representing a cosmological reference point or centre, this time being situated in the exact middle between Potala Mountain, i.e. the abode of Avalokiteśvara in the south, and the spatially opposed to it legendary Kingdom of Shambhala (Tib. *bDe 'byung*) in the north. In Buddhist cosmology, these are two of the five key sites, or “Great Five Empowered Places” (Tib. *gnas chen lnga*), of the terrestrial continent on which humans live. However, the area in the vicinity of the village Ovaata is famous not for its mounds, but foremost for its medicinal springs that are said to have appeared from the footprint of one of the Tārās mentioned in the legend. Miraculous footprints on rocks or on other features of the landscape is also an indication of the taming powers of enlightened beings in Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Schrempf 1994, p. 109). The water from the springs near Ovaata reportedly heals female infertility, and the gulch formed from the goddess’s footprint is considered a particularly powerful place in which to ask for children. Communal worships were annually conducted at the springs until this tradition was interrupted in the 1930s. A stupa, known as Ovata Suburgan, was built there in the 1990s in honour of the Tārās.

## Ovaa Kurgans as ancient tombs: abodes of the original landlords of the steppe

- 28 There is another set of meanings attached to the *ovaa* kurgans in Kalmykia that distinguishes them as a type of monument from the ritual heaps of Inner Asia and may seem contradictory to the previous section of this article as it provides a totally different answer to the cosmopolitical question of “masterhood” with regard to the mounds. This set of conceptions, involving additional taboos, is connected with the initial “direct” function of the mounds as tumuli containing graves of peoples who lived in this area hundreds and even thousands of years before the Oirat westward migration.
- 29 Scholars tend to agree that the Inner Asian *ovoo*, as distinguished from the Kalmyk *ovaa* kurgans, are usually not sites of human burial, even though they do sometimes contain relics of important ancestors (Evans & Humphrey 2003, p. 199) and in certain contexts even signify the actual places of burial, one example being the Daur tombstone *ovoos*. To what extent the Kalmyks used the mound tombs of their predecessors on the Caspian steppe as their own mortuary sites remains to be investigated. Regional historians mention that occasional burials at the foot of kurgans were practised in Kalmykia until the 1930s (Sharaeva 2017, p. 46), although the role of pre-historic mounds in Kalmyk life-cycle rites demands further research. In certain cases, kurgans were reportedly used as the sites of cremation of Kalmyk nobles. Khan Donduk Dashi (1741-1761) is said to have been cremated on a mound in the southeast of the Caspian Depression, known as Chinderta Tolga, from “to be cremated” (Kalm. *chindrllh*)<sup>14</sup>. The khan’s ashes were supposedly buried on the kurgan, although this type of burial was not typical of the Kalmyks as the ashes left after the cremation of khans were usually taken to Tibet to be used for making special statuettes (Bakaeva 2009, p. 99). The mound Chinderta Tolga, also called Donduk Dashi Kurgan, has never ceased to be an important site of worship, not even during the Soviet period. Perceived as regularly visited by Buddhas and other enlightened beings, the earth from this mound and its close proximity is said to have medicinal properties, being used during epizootics

(Tserenov 2009). In the 1990s, a stupa (Donduk Dashi Suburgan) was erected on the mound in the memory of the khan.

- 30 With the advent of archaeological works in Kalmykia in the late 1920s<sup>15</sup>, it became a matter of common knowledge that the mounds are ancient tombs containing various historical objects, such as weapons, pottery, tools, jewellery and, importantly, human remains that may date as far back as the Bronze Age. This understanding, largely based on modern archaeological research, has received significance in Kalmyk cosmopolitics and ritual life, being simultaneously presented as something historically known to the Kalmyks, or rather the Oirats, since the time of their arrival to the Caspian lowlands. The historicity of this knowledge cannot be rejected outright as a contemporary “construct”, as burial mounds have been historically present throughout Inner Asia. Thus, Tibetan kings of the pre-Imperial era were buried in huge earth mound tombs, referred to as “mountains”, which were identified with the kings buried there and also associated with mountains (Huber 1994b, p. 26); while dominating the Yarlung valley, similar monumental mortuary structures are scattered throughout other areas of Tibet (Kværne 2015, pp. 167-168)<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, whether the Oirats initially knew that these barrows were graves of former inhabitants of this area and therefore wished to propitiate them – especially if we keep in mind the Mongol notion that territorial spirits are often souls of deceased people – or whether their importance has been foremost connected with the cult of heights, the mounds often being the highest points in the landscape, is another important topic that demands further research. One is inclined to think that the origins of the cult of mounds in Kalmykia encompassed a combination of multiple factors. While the complex issue of historicity of this knowledge is beyond this article, I shall focus on some of its implications in contemporary religious discourses and practice.
- 31 The ancient buried in the mounds have become regarded as another category of beings, or powerful forces, with whom a proper relationship based on reciprocity must be established and maintained. Whereas the Kalmyks are historically migrants to their present-day locale in the northern Caspian lowlands, those buried in kurgans came to embody the image of the original inhabitants and rulers of this land. Remaining in the ground for centuries and even thousands of years, with their continued presence being conspicuous in the mounds, they are the ancient protectors of the territory. In this sense, a migrant as a newcomer must receive a sort of authorization to be allowed to live in a new place. I shall give a short example to illustrate this aspect of the local cosmopolitics. During my first visit to Tsagan Aman in the summer of 2012, Lama Balji Nima was proud to show me a recently consecrated *ovaa* kurgan, a low mound on the steppe just outside the village. A heap of stones piled around a tall pole in the form of a long spear or a flagpole was erected on it. Inserted in the middle of the heap was also a birch tree with ribbons and scarves of different colours tied to its branches, this correlating with the aforementioned Torghut custom of erecting wooden poles on kurgans. It received the name Ijil Golyn Ovaa (the “ovaa of the Volga river”), being dedicated to the Torghut Kalmyks who died during the exodus from the Volga to Jungaria in 1771, another grave page of Kalmyk history (fig. 2). Not only that approximately 100 000 people out of the 169,000 who had departed for Jungaria that year died, but it also led to the abolition of the Kalmyk Khanate by the tsarist government. At the foot of the mound, there is a black marble monument in the form

of a small nomad tent (*Kalm. ger*) with a dedication verse to the victims of the exodus (fig. 3).

Figure 2. Ijil Golyn Ovaa



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Figure 3. The monument dedicated to the victims of the 1771 Torghut exodus



© Valeria Gazizova, August 2012

- 32 The day after the *ovaa* consecration ceremony, Balji Nima had a vision, in which he saw “a Sarmatian shamaness sleeping in a foetal position with a smile on her face under Ijil Golyn Ovaa. Nine vases with precious offerings were placed around her.” He was very content to have had this vision and interpreted it as a sign of approval from the ancient protectors of this land. Balji Nima did not explain how he knew that the woman was Sarmatian. The pre-historic inhabitants of the northern Caspian are popularly conceptualized in Kalmykia as “Scythians” and “Sarmatians”<sup>17</sup>. What the lama did explain was that by means of this vision the “ancient owners of the land” showed that they had accepted the *ovaa* cairn and other offerings made at the kurgan and, importantly, that they allow for this site to commemorate the Torghuts who died in 1771. In order to erect an edifice commemorating a certain part of Kalmyk history and thereby inscribing Kalmyk history on the north Caspian steppe, a permission from “Sarmatian predecessors” is envisaged as necessary in terms of Kalmyk cosmopolitics. In this way, Ijil Golyn Ovaa through the ritual agency of a Buddhist lama has become a point of convergence between what one can term the “history of the territory” (the Volga steppe and all its previous inhabitants) and the “history of the people” (i.e. the Kalmyks who descend from the Oirat migrants to these lands)<sup>18</sup>. Consequently, by worshipping the mounds and thereby ritually appealing to the ancient protectors of the steppe, the Kalmyks materialize their legitimacy not only of the land use, but also of their very presence in the given locale. Literally understood as abodes of the lords of the land housing bodies of the ancient, the *ovaa* kurgans function as spatiotemporal power spots that not only establish connection between distinct cosmological realms (i.e. the spatial aspect of *axis mundi*), but also serve as centres of interaction between different times, or distant historical epochs. This brings us to the crucial question of the temporality of *ovaa* kurgans, the issue I turn to next.

## Ovaa Kermen Tolga: archaeological excavations and active sacred nature

- 33 Perhaps the biggest, and definitely among the most well-known, kurgan in present-day Kalmykia is situated about 12 km southeast of Elista (the capital of Kalmykia), in the Iki-Burul district near the village of Orgakin. It is the steppe-desert zone of the southern part of the Ergeni Upland. At present, this kurgan is about 8 m in height and 80 m in diameter (fig. 4). Before the start of archaeological works in the late 1960s, its dimensions were reported to have been greater<sup>19</sup>. Mounds of various size are located around it, with a chain of smaller barrows stretching for several kilometres to the east. Since the pre-Soviet era, this mound has been worshipped as the ancestral locus of the Orgakin clan (Rus. *rod*)<sup>20</sup> and is commonly known in Kalmykia by the name Kermen Tolga. Later, the entire necropolis to the east of the kurgan came to be referred to in archaeological literature as Kermen Tolga after its biggest barrow. Various popular narratives accounting for its name circulate in Kalmykia. One legend relates that the mound was called Kermen after the name of the girl allegedly buried inside it. Since Kermen is a widespread Kalmyk name (meaning “squirrel”, from the noun *kermn*), this account implies the Kalmyk origin of the woman buried in the kurgan. The head lama of Orgakin Hurul, Baatr Elistaev, translated the name of the mound as “ship”, connecting it with the noun *kerm*. He argues that the mound received this name because of its great size and specific shape reminiscent of a sailing vessel.

Figure 4. Ovaa Kermen Tolga



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- 34 Besides “ship”, the word *kerm* also denotes “fortress” or “citadel”. This accounts for another narrative, according to which the kurgan Kermen Tolga was the fortress in the capital of the South Scythian kingdom that allegedly existed in this territory at the turn

of the first millennium AD. Stories circulated among the locals relate that it concealed Scythian gold, silver and precious jewellery. Most importantly, it is said to have housed bones – and in some versions even (*sic*) “bodies” – of Scythian and Sarmatian nobles until they were excavated and removed by Soviet archaeologists. Archaeological research in fact attests that the Sarmatians inhabited the Ergeni Upland, being particularly densely situated in the region of the necropolis. However, the origins of the mound Kermen Tolga itself have been assigned by archaeologists to a much earlier period.

- 35 Archaeological excavations of the burial ground were first conducted from 1968 until 1970, then again in 1977 and several times during the 1980s (Kol'tsova & Mandzhiev 2016). The kurgan Kermen Tolga was researched for the first time in 1968, which was part of the archaeological survey conducted by a joint expedition of the Kalmyk Research Institute of Language, Literature and History<sup>21</sup>, the Kalmyk Republican Museum of Regional Studies (the present-day National Museum of Kalmykia) and the Saratov State University. The works were directed by a Kalmyk historian, Uriubdzhur Erdniev, and a Russian archaeologist, Ivan Sinitsyn. The excavations of 1968-1970 revealed that the kurgan Kermen Tolga consisted of four separate mounds built next to one another (Erdniev 1982, p. 56). One may suppose that the kurgan was constructed in several stages, which possibly stretched through centuries, if not longer. Inside the kurgan, eleven burial chambers were discovered, six of which contained skeletons of children. While most of the burials inside the mound have been assigned to the Catacomb culture, i.e. the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, several could not be dated as the skeletons inside these chambers had been severely destroyed either by Soviet bulldozers during the excavations or looters supposedly of earlier historical eras. Archaeologists do not reject the idea that these undated burials may belong to the earlier Pit Grave culture (i.e. the Eneolithic to early Bronze Age, ca. 3300-2600 BC) as the catacomb burials were often introduced in mounds built by earlier inhabitants. All graves containing skeletons of children were attributed to the Catacomb period. Besides human burials, four altar complexes discovered inside the kurgan contained skulls and tubular bones of sacrificial animals (mostly cattle, but also sheep), as well as incense burners and clay vessels of different size and colour (mostly dark-grey, red and ochre) (Erdniev 1982, pp. 53-56; Kekeev 2019). None of the burials in the biggest kurgan have so far been attributed to the Sarmatian period, although this territory is documented to have been an important Sarmatian centre, and mounds belonging to Sarmatian culture have also been identified in its vicinity<sup>22</sup>.
- 36 Accordingly, one burial ground can comprise mounds dating from different historical eras, a vivid example being the entire necropolis of Kermen Tolga as it houses mounds identified as belonging to the Eneolithic Age, the Bronze Age, the Scythio-Sarmatian period, and the Golden Horde<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, one and the same mound can include burials of different historical periods, as is the case with the kurgan Kermen Tolga. What seems to be particularly intriguing about this mound, and also correlates with Kalmyk cosmological meanings attributed to the *ovaá* kurgans, is the case of its largest burial chamber situated in the centre. It was identified by archaeologists as the main burial of the kurgan, with the central position supposedly attesting to the social importance of the person buried there. By the time of the excavations in the late 1960s, it had been completely destroyed and plundered. Although it remains problematic to identify precisely as to what era it dates from, one assumption is that it belongs to the Bronze

Age, as is the case with the majority of the burials inside this barrow. However, a small axe (of a socketed type) was found inside it, as well as fragments of a horse skull with runic inscriptions. While the axe was identified by researchers as belonging to the Sarmatian period, the inscriptions on the skull were assigned to the epoch of the Khazar Khaganate, i.e. the 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. On this basis, Erdniev (1982, p. 104) argues that the Sarmatian axe had been stolen from a different mound, one belonging to Sarmatian culture, and left inside this grave of presumably the middle Bronze Age by looters living in the Khazar Khaganate. In this sense, *ovaa* kurgans and the mound Kermen Tolga in particular are indeed points of intersection of distant and entirely distinct historical epochs.

- 37 It sounds like another paradox, but the Soviet archaeological research seems to somewhat echo Kalmyk Buddhist cosmology by describing the steppe kurgans as joints between distinct realms and eras. The central burial of Kermen Tolga presents an illustrative case – a Sarmatian tool left in a Bronze Age burial by looters from the Khazar Khaganate, with all this discovered and described in the Soviet period (one can perhaps continue this line of time-lapse vision). In this interplay of temporalities, the *ovaa* kurgans function as agents of both history and timelessness. By timelessness in this case, I understand not so much the impossibility to define the concrete historical origin of a monument in question (cf. Evans & Humphrey 2003), but rather the multiplicity and non-linear coexistence of numerous temporalities in one particular spatial context.
- 38 At the beginning of this article I have referred to several anthropological approaches treating “landscape” as an ongoing process, or as a perpetual interactivity of transforming and becoming, of shaping and being shaped (e.g. Ingold 1993; Hirsch 1995; Bender 2002). Being in process, landscape is not only temporal, but also develops a specific relationship with time – or more correctly it manifests a specific temporality, which is akin to that of a narrative. Continuously incorporating or enfolding the lives, activities, values and times of all its previous inhabitants, the landscape is simultaneously unfolding to its current inhabitant or observer as a story, or rather as a corpus of heterogeneous narratives – myths, legends, historical accounts or individual life-histories attached to it. Bender (2002, p. 103), for instance, argues that landscape manifests the materialization of time: “*Landscape is time materialized*. Or, better, *Landscape is time materializing*”. The temporality of the landscape is therefore highly complex as it encompasses the relationships between the endless temporalities of all its inhabitants, previous and current; it is constituted by the cycles of all human and non-human life and subsistence that have existed therein and have been incorporated in the landscape (see also Ingold 1993). In this sense, the landscape has a temporal depth, being history-laden and also memory-laden. Landscapes emerge not only through ways of life, but also in the process of remembering, and for this reason they can play a pivotal role in making histories and, consequently, making and unmaking identities. “To perceive the landscape”, according to Ingold (1993, pp. 152-153), is “to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as to engage perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past”. I suggest seeing this type of engagement with the landscape as creative remembering as it is creative of local pasts and identities. Remembering in this case can be virtually equated with constructing histories and inventing traditions by

means of attributing meanings and interpretations to the perceived traces of the past, or rather multiple pasts, in the physical surrounding (cf. Hobsbawm 1983, pp. 1-14).

- 39 Such interaction with the landscape through creative remembering is significant to the practical and conceptual engagement of Kalmyks with the steppe burial mounds, particularly in the post-Soviet era of ethno-cultural renewal. As discussed in the previous sections of this article, the *ovaa* kurgans can be regarded as the quintessential points of the Kalmyk Buddhist landscape, conceived of in the local idiom as copies of the entire cosmos. Being material supports set in the landscape that connect numerous historical periods and comprise a complex superimposition of temporalities, the kurgans simultaneously function as important media of perceived knowledge about the past through which histories are produced and related. The past or, more correctly, multiple, heterogeneous and seemingly unconnected pasts speak to a current observer in the present through the kurgans and engagement with them. This experience of the pasts in the present activates historical consciousness and enables a retrieval of knowledge (and/or imaginaries) about the past from the land, depending on the observer's perspective. In the following sections, I shall continue demonstrating how mounds can enable a retrieval of knowledge about the past, what periods of Kalmyk history, as well as of Central Asian Buddhist history and a broader history of the Caspian Depression, are brought into connection in the post-Soviet time and how it works in the contemporary Kalmyk Buddhist cosmopolitics.

## Conflicting landscapes and ambivalent agencies of kurgans

- 40 While certain archaeological findings may surprisingly support Kalmyk cosmological views, there is a severe ontological collision between archaeological science and the Kalmyk ritual code in relation to the excavations of mounds. Numerous taboos with regard to kurgans, including prohibitions from climbing and driving up them, or grazing cattle there, are foremost connected with them being sites of human graves. The idea of danger emanating from the dead and hence from human remains and burial places is widespread in Mongolia, Altai, Tuva or Buryatia (Humphrey 2001, p. 63; Halemba 2008, p. 284; Broz 2018). In Altai, for instance, dead bodies are considered highly dangerous for the living as they are held to be connected with the "souls" of the dead, or ghosts, that are highly protective of their bodily remains; the dead are said to be particularly attached and therefore harmful to their kin, with a wide range of rituals aimed at destroying the link between the deceased and their relatives known in Altai (Anokhin 1924, pp. 19-32). Similarly to other Inner Asian societies, the Kalmyks believe that the dead should not be disturbed – let alone removed from their graves – otherwise they can harm the living by causing all types of misfortune, including severe illness and even death. Burial grounds are generally considered "impure" and dangerous, and unlike Russians, the Kalmyks do not have a tradition of commemorating dead relatives by going to a cemetery every year.
- 41 The kurgans, however, are not simply regarded as ordinary burial sites, but – as already explained – have come to be treated in Kalmykia as the abodes of the ancient masters of the territory. Damaging mounds therefore can reportedly lead to even more serious consequences than destruction of cemeteries. Stories about people being punished for disturbing kurgans, such as accounts of boisterous chaps racing up a mound on a

motorcycle and breaking their legs, or even dying, are retold. Consequently, *ovaa* kurgans, historically venerated by the Kalmyks as ancestral mounts, are governed by ritual prohibitions in connection with them being both burial grounds of the ancient and sacred heights of those living there today. It comes as no surprise that numerous narratives of transgression and subsequent retribution, should be connected with Kermen Tolga, the biggest *ovaa* kurgan in Kalmykia. To give an example: grazing cattle on its top or even at the foot is considered a taboo, and it is also believed that if a cow walks up on its top, a war will begin. In the summer of 1941, just before WWII, a cow is said to have been seen on Kermen Tolga. In this way, through the medium of signs and taboos, the kurgan communicates with humans.

- 42 A complicated multidimensional interface of polysemous agencies is apparent. On the one hand, kurgans are conceptualized as abodes and meeting points of numerous categories of non-human agents (nagas, the White Old Man, Tantric deities, Tsongkhapa, Scythian and Sarmatian nobles, etc.), each category being more than benevolent or even indifferent to humans and therefore demanding proper ritual relationships. On the other hand, as if changing the degree of optical depth, *ovaa* kurgans in their entirety are also seen as not merely passive geophysical objects, but as active and agentic, i.e. they are recognized as intentional and able to act at their own discretion. This acknowledgement can be hardly surprising if we remember that the steppe burial mounds have been transformed into sacred mounts in the Kalmyk ritual landscape and are therefore treated as wilful deities. Furthermore, the agency of *ovaa* kurgans is highly ambivalent. Kurgans unite family clans, provide fertility to living beings and prosperity to humans, warn people by giving signs and avert disasters, heal the sick, grant wishes and even reveal treasures, the topic I shall return to later. However, they can also punish for intrusion on their territory and breaking taboos against actions regarded as polluting. Illnesses, disasters, road accidents, crimes, untimely deaths and even wars are said to happen because mounds and hence all entities abiding or meeting at their site have been mistreated. Ambivalent agencies permeate the entire Kalmyk landscape as it is “cosmopolitical” in the sense suggested by de la Cadena (2010) or Stengers (2005), i.e. recognizing the powers and intentions of non-human elements dwelling in it – in this way people, animals, spirits, deities, Buddhas, etc. all partake in the process of constituting and transforming the Kalmyk landscape<sup>24</sup>.
- 43 Locals of the Iki-Burul district still frequently express their great dismay at the archaeological research – or in their words “archaeological destruction” – of Kermen Tolga. After the excavations in the late 1960s, the site of the mound is said to have become highly inauspicious and allegedly provoking numerous car accidents in its vicinity. This was interpreted by the locals as an inevitable retaliation for having opened the sacred mound, as well as other barrows around it, and removed the bones and objects that had been concealed there for several thousand years. This Kalmyk controversy reminds us of the conflicts in relation to the so-called Ukok Princess, a 2500-year-old female mummy discovered in 1993 by Russian archaeologists in a mound on the Ukok Plateau in the Republic of Altai (Halemba 2008). While the locals in Altai attribute the earthquakes and other disasters in the area to the wrath of the excavated “princess” and insist that she should be reburied, the scientists see the well-preserved mummy foremost as a highly significant archaeological find that can lead to further scientific discoveries. With the mummy officially recognized as part of the national

heritage of the Russian Federation, the Altaian requests for its reburial have been systematically denied (Halemba 2008; Broz 2009; Plets *et al.* 2013)<sup>25</sup>.

- 44 As is the case with the Ukok Princess, the human remains and objects removed from Kermen Tolga cannot be reburied in the mound, even though this is held to be the best way to restore the proper relations between the mound and people in terms of Kalmyk cosmopolitics. In both cases (whether in Kalmykia or Altai), we have a situation of collision between two conflicting and simultaneously interpenetrating systems and their corresponding “landscapes”, i.e. that of the Soviet/post-Soviet state and that of “cosmopolitical geography” of the local population. While the latter constructs the mounds with the ancient dead buried inside as special places of “exclusion” marked and protected by strict ritual taboos, the former is aimed at penetration, centralization and conquest of the land, its resources and its history. Nevertheless, the desecration of Kermen Tolga had to be ritually rectified; first and foremost, it had to be done in order to stop frequent road accidents in the area. It was considered the duty of local lamas to appease the wrathful agencies of the landscape and to purify the site by rebuilding the destroyed kurgan, re-consecrating it and restoring it as a place of worship. Re-consecration of mounds, particularly those that have been looted or destroyed by excavations, is an important Kalmyk cosmopolitical means of improving relationship with the landscape.
- 45 In the mid-2000s, Kermen Tolga was restored as a place of worship largely through the efforts of Orgakin Hurul. The Kalmyk term *hurul* is currently used for both a Buddhist monastery and temple, and can denote both a community of fully-ordained monks and that of non-celibate Buddhist professionals. The present-day Orgakin Hurul consists of so-called “lay lamas” with the vows of *genin* (Tib. *dge bsnyen*). Positioned as the sacred locus of the Orgakin clan, Kermen Tolga is viewed as historically connected with Orgakin Hurul, also having a spatial interrelationship with the restored temple. Among the most well-known post-Soviet Kalmyk Buddhist organizations, thanks to the efforts of its devoted head lama Lupon Gombo Dorje (Baatr Elistaev), the present-day Orgakin Hurul defines itself as a successor of one of the largest and most hallowed pre-revolutionary Kalmyk monasteries, Rashi Lhunpo (Tib. *bKra shis lhun po*), or – to use the full Kalmyk name – *Ik Bogdo Dalai Lamin Rashi Lhunpo*. It is said to have been founded in Tibet by the fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Tib. *Ngag dbang Blo bzang rGya mtsho*), and brought to the Volga steppes in 1681 as a gift to Aiuka Khan, the ruler of the Kalmyk Khanate from 1672 until 1724 (interview with Baatr Elistaev, October 2018)<sup>26</sup>. Pre-revolutionary monasteries were usually associated with particular patrilineages, with Rashi Lhunpo belonging to five Kalmyk clans, including that of Orgakin. In 1856, it was abolished by the Russian government, but nevertheless continued functioning “secretly” as unofficial prayer yurts were set up by monks from the former Rashi Lhunpo soon after its dissolution. Orgakin monks established their “secret” monastery in the late 1850s in the same place where the post-Soviet Orgakin Hurul was built in the 2000s<sup>27</sup>. Accordingly, a patrilineal descent and spatial relationship function in the given case as the ground for being acknowledged as a legitimate successor of a pre-revolutionary monastery and/or Buddhist lineage.
- 46 The consecration of Kermen Tolga was attended by over 100 people from different districts of Kalmykia (interview with Baatr Elistaev, October 2018). Being the biggest restored *ovaa kurgan*, its present-day veneration does not seem to be limited to the Orgakins. Lamas from Mongolia were also invited for the rituals. During the worship, a

heap of stones around a high central pole was erected on the top of the kurgan by all men present at the ceremony. While women were circumambulating the mound and offering libations of milk at the foot, men went up the barrow and each added a stone to the cairn on its top. The stones had been brought from elsewhere and placed at the foot of the mound before the ceremony. The poles, covered in prayer flags, around the stone cairn reportedly denote the ten directions in Buddhist cosmology<sup>28</sup>. These attributes reiterate the idea that the *ovaa* kurgan represents the entire cosmos.

- 47 New stones are regularly added to the cairn on Kermen Tolga (exclusively by men) as offerings to the mound and its seasonal renewal during Ürs Sar. Other usual offerings to *ovaa* kurgans include coins, sweets, pastry, and libations of milk, tea and vodka. In the pre-Soviet era, travellers would also leave their cut off fingernails, and even toenails, at the foot of the mounds, especially if they had nothing else to offer. There does not seem to be one particular explanation of why nails were offered to kurgans. Since nails traditionally function among the Kalmyks as a substitute for the entire human body and also represent the life-force of a person, one may suppose that it was another case of reciprocal exchange, involving self-offering for the sake of protection and good fortune, between a sacred height and humans. While offering one's life-force to the kurgan, the person not only showed respect to the invisible beings residing in it, but also intensified the life-force of the mound and thus increased his or her own well-being<sup>29</sup>. At present, ribbons (Kalm. *ölqtsy*) of different colours, ritual scarves (Kalm. *hadak*, Tib. *kha btags*) and prayer flags (Kalm. *ki mörn*, Tib. *rlung rta*) are tied to the trees in the vicinity of Kermen Tolga, while the prayer flags covering the poles on the top are renewed annually. During the seasonal rituals of "sacrifice to the *ovaa*", dry incense, grain, offering cakes made of dough or paper (Kalm. *balin*, Tib. *gtor ma*) and certain parts of a sacrificial ram burnt in the fire are usually offered. Another type of offering is known as *setrlh*, when a sheep or goat is consecrated to the kurgan and the deities associated with it<sup>30</sup>. Distinguished by a ribbon, the consecrated animal is considered ritually protected and cannot be slaughtered for food. In general, one may conclude that ritual practices and actions at the Kalmyk *ovaa* kurgans largely overlap with those conducted at the *ovoo* elsewhere in Mongol areas, such as inserting a pole on its top, laying offerings before it, consecrating animals, making offerings of libations, circumambulating it clockwise, making wishes, to name just a few (cf. Davaa-Ochir 2008; Lindskog 2016).

## A mound reveals "treasure": the Shatta discovery

- 48 In the spring of 2016, a pre-revolutionary collection of Buddhist images and ritual objects was found in a mound between the villages Shatta and Altsynhuta in the Ketchenerovskii district, the so-called "heart of Kalmykia" due to its central location. It was discovered by a Kalmyk electrician in his mid-fifties living in Shatta. According to his own account, he was helping his nephew with herds on a bright May day when he saw a small bronze statuette on a mound on the steppe near his nephew's livestock farm. As he was told later, it was an image of an arhat from an iconographical composition comprising the Buddha and his two close students. The image was badly damaged and had no arms. Fascinated, he brought it home and showed it to his wife, who insisted that he should go back and find the arms as keeping damaged images of deities is believed to be highly inauspicious. The following morning, with a shovel in his

hands, he came back to the mound. While looking for the lost arms, he found more statues, all reportedly buried half a metre in the mound (interview with Nikolai Ivanov, October 2018). Monks from the Central Hurul of Kalmykia, the Golden Temple of Buddha Śākyamuni (Kalm. Burhn Bagshin Altn Süm), were soon invited to identify the objects and possibly help with further discoveries (fig. 5).

Figure 5. The head monk of the Central Hurul, Anja Gelüng, reciting prayers on the mound where the Shatta collection was found



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- 49 Unlike Kermen Tolga, the mound where the images were found does not seem to have any particular name, being not bigger than 2 m in height and 20 m in diameter. According to my interlocutors, it has not been excavated by archaeologists. Although popularly referred to as a “Scythian kurgan”, archaeological research conducted in the northernmost reaches of the Caspian Depression, including the area between Shatta and Altsynhuta, reveals that most kurgans there date from the middle Bronze Age and may contain human burials of different historical eras. The only excavated mound in the vicinity of Altsyhuta had one burial belonging to the epoch of the Golden Horde (Kol'tsov & Dremov 2011, pp. 27-39; Kol'tsova & Mandzhiev 2016, p. 105).
- 50 All in all, over twenty items have been unearthed from the same mound, among which are ten statuettes of Buddhist figures, including images of Buddha Śākyamuni, Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara, the lion-headed *ḍākinī* *Simhamukhā*, the bear-headed *Ṛkṣavaktra*, and a bronze triptych of the Buddha and his disciples. Several of these have been identified by the monks from the Central Hurul as having been brought from Tibet, but could not be dated precisely. Besides the statues, a *thangka* (Tib. *thang ka*), a traditional Buddhist depiction on fabric, and Tibetan texts had been concealed, but they crumbled as soon as they were unearthed, with only small fragments remaining. The other objects have been repaired as far as possible, and now they belong to the

permanent collection of the Museum of the History of Buddhism in the Central Hurul in Elista. The head lama of Kalmykia (Shadjin Lama) Telo Tulku Rinpoche blessed the discovery, acknowledging its historical and religious importance, and named it “the Shatta collection”.

- 51 The discovery and events around it received much attention in the local media<sup>31</sup>. The unearthed images are popularly accorded numinous powers and even revelatory status, being perceived as having revealed themselves – or “returned” – at the time of the ongoing religious and ethno-cultural reconstitution. “Buddhas are coming out from the ground”, runs the heading of an article in a local newspaper, its conclusion effectively summarizing the local reverence towards the find:

The Kalmyk land is keeping many secrets. Many sacred relics, so dear for us, are still waiting for their turn. Buddhas cannot stay forever in the darkness, they are reaching out for the light. (Koneev 2016)

- 52 One is reminded of the Tibetan “treasure”, or *terma* (Tib. *gter ma*), tradition of a revelation of texts and objects of religious significance that are believed to have been hidden away in various places (e.g. statues, trees, landforms and even one’s mind)<sup>32</sup> by adepts in the past in order to be recovered at an appropriate time in the future (e.g. Gyatso 1996). This particular discovery in the kurgan comes closest to the category known as “earth treasure” (Tib. *sa gter*), which refers to physical objects revealed from the ground, rocks and so on. The opposition and alternation of “darkness” and “light”, as is evident from the quotation, with Buddhas having to go underground and stay in darkness during the painful Soviet period, are the tropes that Tibetan *terma* literature (Gayley 2007) and Kalmyk narratives centred on the recently unearthed images seem to share.

- 53 However, the Shatta collection has not been officially recognized as *terma* by the Kalmyk Buddhist establishment. Technically, the “treasure revelation” is a much more complex process based on visionary experience of treasure discoverers, or *tertön* (Tib. *gter ston*), and includes a number of obligatory stages (Thondup 1990). For the found items to be recognized as “treasures”, their discoverer must first be identified as a reincarnation of an earlier treasure concealer or that of his students (Gyatso 1996). Moreover, the Kalmyk Central Hurul, which supervised the restoration and ritual works in connection with the Shatta find, view the *terma* tradition as not historically typical of Kalmykia (interview with Anja Gelüng, November 2018). Although not recognized as *terma*, the unearthed Shatta images are nevertheless treated as “sacred relics” and regarded as discovered treasure objects in a broader sense. Exploring treasure discoveries in Greece, particularly those belonging to prophetic traditions and accorded religious significance, Stewart defines treasures as “traces of the past in the present” (2003, p. 487), arguing that their very value consists in that they benefit the present and also the future by revealing the past. In this sense, treasures are not only bound up with history, but they also have a potential to produce and re-evaluate history. The images found in the Shatta mound serve to inspire faith among devotees, strengthen the on-going religious renewal and, most crucially, promote Buddhism as the historical religion of the Kalmyks.

- 54 Although nobody in Kalmykia has ever referred to the electrician from Shatta as a *tertön*, it has been emphasized not only by older locals, but also by the Kalmyk Buddhist establishment and regional media that it was not a mere coincidence that it was this particular man who found the hidden objects. In the Buddhist idiom, such discoveries

are made neither by chance nor by any random person. The Shatta discovery is attributed to the “karmic mission” of the man who found it because his granduncle was Gavva Saperov, a revered Buddhist monk and the Shadjn Lama of Kalmykia in the early 1920s. Some locals go as far as saying that he is a rebirth of his renown granduncle. Born in 1884, Gavva Saperov studied for sixteen years in Tibet and received the degree of *geshe* (Tib. *dge bshes*). Returning to Kalmykia in 1917, he taught Buddhist philosophy at Tsannid Chöra (Tib. *mtshan nyid chos grwa*) Hurul, the main educational centre for Kalmyk monks established in 1907. He was elected the Lama of the Kalmyk Buddhists in 1920, but had to renounce this post after four years due to poor health. In 1931, he was accused of counterrevolutionary activity according to Article 58 in the Soviet Criminal Code, standard charges for clergy in the 1930s, and sentenced to seven years of forced labour in corrective camps (Dordzhieva 2014, p. 43). What seems to be particularly important for our case is that Lama Saperov is remembered in Kalmykia foremost for his healing and visionary talents, or *siddhi* – the Indic concept routinely translated as “magic powers” – attributed to him. Oral histories relate that he cured alcoholism by means of a special whip that he had inscribed with magic formulae (Kalm. *tärni*; Skt. *dhāraṇī*)<sup>33</sup>. It is popularly believed that the old lama bequeathed some part of his visionary talents to his grandnephew, which enabled the latter to make the discovery.

## Mounds as “agents” of concealment and mnemonic devices

55 While no one in Kalmykia seems to have doubts as to who found the Shatta collection, different opinions have been expressed with regard to who might have concealed it. All versions, nevertheless, relate to the Soviet period, when Buddhism, having been defined as “counterrevolutionary”, went underground, including in the literal sense. Not only did it become an unofficial activity conducted in secret to avoid government punishment, but as was the case during periods of the persecution of Buddhism in Tibetan areas (McGranahan 2010) and in Mongolia (Lindskog 2016), Kalmyks also buried Buddhist texts, images and ritual objects in the ground, particularly in the 1930s and the early 1940s, the decades of severe anti-Buddhist repressions and subsequent deportation of the Kalmyks. When the Kalmyks were allowed to return to the Volga steppes in the late 1950s, some of these Buddhist items were unearthed and kept at homes, being used in covert rituals. In this movement of concealment, mounds were often chosen as the sites for deposition. As has been explained to me, one reason was their salience – as mounds are relatively prominent and easy to identify, people hoped they would know where to look for the hidden objects upon return. Paradoxically, the most salient features of the landscape functioned as sites of concealment of then compromising Buddhist paraphernalia. Furthermore, envisioned as abodes of deities and therefore ritually protected sites, the *ovaa* kurgans were regarded as safer and more appropriate places for depositing Buddhist images and texts, i.e. objects perceived as holding the Buddha presence. This period of severe persecution of religion can be nevertheless described as another wave of the Buddhization of the Volga steppe, albeit in a different and quite literal sense. Hidden in the ground, Buddhist images and texts transmit the sacred presence they are conceived of as holding to the ground through the contact with it and thereby empower the land. Consequently, mounds received another important meaning in the Soviet era, that of protectors of the

Dharma during the time of Buddhist suppression. It is therefore not surprising that mounds are important places where Buddhist “treasures” can be found<sup>34</sup>.

- 56 People living in Shatta are convinced that it was somebody from their village who hid the images in December 1943, when the entire Kalmyk population was to be deported, having been accused of treason against the Soviet Union. However, monks from the Central Hurul insist that the collection must have belonged to a monastery. They base their opinion on the fact that the *ḍākinī* images<sup>35</sup> found among the items have never been typical of Kalmyk lay practices (fig. 6). The head monk of the Central Hurul, Anja Gelüṅ, suggests that the collection must have been evacuated from the temples that used to be situated in about 6 km from the mound where it was found<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, a monastery complex is documented to have existed on the territory of the present-day Altsynhuta village until the late 1920s (Borisenko 1994, ill). Its construction is connected with the year 1817 as this number is inscribed in the Tibetan script on a sheep shoulder blade discovered in the foundation of one of the destroyed temples. The inscription on the scapula is considered the year marking the building of the first stationary temple there. The place of the former monastery and its environs, including the mounds, is held to be sacred, with legends and prophecies attached to it. Locals relate other occasions when Buddhist images and ritual paraphernalia were found in the kurgans in its vicinity, including stories of looting and subsequent punishments from the mounds.

Figure 6. The image of *Siṃhamukhā* found in the mound



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- 57 In Soviet Kalmykia, mounds functioned not only as hiding-places for “illegal” Buddhist objects, but also as sites of covert worship. Although Buddhism and local forms of folk healing remained illegal in Kalmykia until 1988, underground religious centres were functioning during these decades around dissident monastics who had received a Buddhist education before the persecution of religion and survived years in corrective

labour camps. The vast repertoire of rituals conducted by returnee Buddhists included seasonal worships at kurgans, with virtually every village having a particular mound where annual offerings were covertly made. “Covertly” in this case rather means “unofficially” as the local administration usually turned a blind eye to these events. While some of these ritual loci were the kurgans traditionally venerated by definite patrilineages, others are closely associated with ritual practices of certain “underground lamas” of late socialism. An example of the latter is a low mound near the village of Yashkul in the southeast of Kalmykia, known as Ürlin Tolga, after the name of Ürlia Badgaev (1896-1980), a Buddhist monk and doctor of Tibetan Buddhist medicine (Kalm. *emchi*) who secretly conducted rituals in the 1960 and 1970s. In the mid-2010s, a small altar room was built on the mound (fig. 7). People from Yashkul continue making offerings there for the sake of timely rains twice a year (interviews, October 2018).

Figure 7. Ürlin Tolga



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- 58 Among the well-known centres of religious practice during the time of “underground Buddhism” was in fact the village of Altsynhuta, where Namka Kichikov (1901-1985), a Kalmyk doctor of Tibetan Buddhist medicine and a former monk, lived. The entire area in the vicinity of the village, including the kurgans, is linked to his name. Almost every person older than thirty that I met during field research had an amazing story to tell either about their own visits to Namka or him saving their relatives, or helping someone they knew. In the 1990s, a temple was built in his memory in Altsynhuta, and in 2014, a stupa in his honour was erected in the village (fig. 8). It is at the site of the mound where the Shatta collection was discovered that Namka, usually in a small group of other returnee monastics, is said to have conducted seasonal worship throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Older inhabitants of that area remember that Namka

would ask them not to go up this mound or sit and eat there, or smoke on its top, while shepherds were strictly prohibited from grazing livestock near it. Locals, particularly the older generation, usually throw coins when passing this site as offerings to the sacred kurgan. Besides other meanings attributed to kurgans in Kalmykia, this special attitude of reverence is locally explained foremost by the fact that the old lamas knew that statues and texts, or “treasures”, had been hidden there. In the words of the Kalmyk researcher Bemb Shantaev:

Three well-known former *gelüing*<sup>37</sup>, who secretly practised during the Soviet time, gathered at this place to recite prayers. It was Namka, Zodva<sup>38</sup> and... I cannot recall the name of the third lama. They gathered at the very place where the Shatta collection has been found. It means they knew that something important had been buried there, they knew it was a sacred place. (October 2018)

- 59 Family descendants of Namka Kichikov insist that it was none other than Namka himself who buried the discovered Shatta Buddhas in the mound. During my visit to Altsynhuta in the autumn of 2018, Namka’s eldest son explained that that particular stretch of land in the vicinity of the former monastery, including the mound, has historically been the “ancestral territory” of their clan (Rus. *rodovoe mesto*), and it is at the site of that particular mound that their extended family gathers twice a year for seasonal worship. All these different versions accounting for the origin of the Shatta collection seem equally plausible, with still more tales circulating. Amidst this plethora of narratives, the mound functions not only as the site where the Kalmyk Buddhist past is unfolding, but itself appears as the key agent of concealment and revelation of “treasures” of the local – in this particular case, of Kalmyk Buddhist – history. Retrieving and reconstructing the relatively recent Soviet past is another important role, and another type of agency, that has been attributed to the steppe mounds with the advent of the postsocialist era.

Figure 8. The stupa in the memory of Namka Kichikov in Altsynhuta



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- 60 In the context of Kalmyk Buddhist history during the Soviet period, the kurgans came to be closely connected with the idea and practice of “secrecy”, by which I mean concealment in a general sense. In the Buddhist tradition of the Tibetans and Mongols, the notion of “secrecy” when applied to the landscape is foremost associated with caves as they literally represent hidden void spaces inside another landscape entity. One is immediately reminded of meditation caves, secret cave temples, tunnel caves or womb caves that have historically constituted important pilgrimage places in Buddhist cultures (Charleux 2015). In the Kalmyk landscape, however, this function has been attributed to the most conspicuous landforms in the given topography. As shown above, during the Soviet state persecution of religion kurgans functioned simultaneously as caches of Buddhist images, as sites of “illegal” covert worship and were often associated with underground dissident lamas and healers who secretly conducted rituals during this time. Furthermore, if we keep in mind the initial function of the burial mounds, we can view them as a type of “secret box” structures, with the kurgans being graves disguised as natural hills and, in this way, initially conceived of as containing much more than it may seem at first glance. In this sense, it seems no longer surprising that kurgans became important media through which relationships involving secrecy can be transposed.
- 61 However, secrecy is not limited to the process of concealment, but rather operates through the alternating and interrelated strategies of “concealment and revelation, exclusion and inclusion” (Jones 2014, p. 54). The paradox of secrecy is that it is a form of social agency that is inseparable from at least partial revelation of what it is meant to conceal (Herzfeld 2009, pp. 135-137; Urban 2017 p. 22). While routinely defined as opposed to “publicity”, secrecy – as aptly coined by Herzfeld (2009, p. 135) – “must

itself be performed in a public fashion in order to be understood to exist". Regarding the secrecy of Kalmyk kurgans, the revelation mechanism in this case operates by means of both material discoveries or "treasures" in the land, such as the Shatta collection, and what I have referred to earlier as "creative remembering". Kurgans act as powerful mnemonic devices set in the landscape, allowing for storage and retrieval of social memories and perceived knowledge about the past. Firstly, *ovaa* kurgans are traditionally connected to particular Kalmyk patrilineages and clan territories, which are constitutive of contemporary Kalmyk ethnic identities. Secondly, mounds are also often associated with certain pre-revolutionary Buddhist monasteries and personalities, this connection being highly significant for reconstitution of Kalmyk religious identities. Furthermore, as my material shows, any given kurgan may serve simultaneously as an index to numerous other historical and mythological events, charismatic Buddhist adepts and healers of the past, half-legendary khans and war heroes, miraculous recoveries and prophetic visions. Hence, kurgans are not merely static reminders (or mementoes bound up with one particular personality, monastery or clan) encoded in the landscape, but the sites where the pasts are being endlessly concealed and revealed, and recreated and revalued.

## Conclusion

- 62 In the context of the northern Caspian flatlands, the burial mounds of pre-historic inhabitants of this territory have been incorporated in the religious and political life of the Kalmyks. What came to be referred to in Kalmykia by the compound term *ovaa kurgan/ovaa tolga* constitutes a specific interstitial category of ritual sites which combines the significance of sacred mountains traditionally attributed among the Mongols with the functions of the Inner Asian *ovoo*. This article has described some of the complex semantics imputed to the steppe mounds within the framework of cosmopolitical geography of the Kalmyks. While conceptualized as reference points of the sacred geography and cosmology projected onto the physical world, the kurgans have also been instrumental in the process of Buddhization of the northern Caspian region, i.e. in the making of the Kalmyk Buddhist landscape. As my material shows, the Caspian Depression emerges in contemporary Kalmyk Buddhist discourse and ritual practice as an empowered special zone, not to say paranormal, largely situated below the sea level and consisting of a complicated network of innumerable ancient tumuli. This conceptually constructed system of "interconnected sacred mounts", albeit in the topography of flatlands situated below the sea level, is also perceived as having been ritually connected – and thereby structuralized – to the mountain ranges of Central Asia, Altai and the Himalayas, being therefore conceived of as part of the sacred geographies of Mongolia, Altai and Tibet.
- 63 Any given *ovaa* kurgan appears as a representation – and also an excerpt – of the entire cosmos applied to the physical world which encompasses a vast number of different categories of non-human actors (deities, spirits, dragons, etc.) with whom proper relations are to be established and maintained, including foremost by means of offerings and rituals taboos at the site of mounds. In this sense, the kurgans function as powerful places of exclusion limiting one's presence and structuring one's conduct at their site. It is precisely for this reason, because they function as powerful "negative spaces" in the Kalmyk landscape, that the kurgans often become the foci of competing

claims and collision between conflicting systems, e.g. between the Soviet state and the Kalmyk Buddhist establishment, or between archaeological research and Inner Asian cosmopolitical geographies.

- 64 Of central importance is the attributed role of kurgans as powerful binding forces which function not only as a socio-spatial nexus of Kalmyk cosmology, establishing connections between distinct universal realms, but also as points of intersection of different historical epochs. Ritual actions performed at the site of kurgans are also aimed foremost at recreating the mound as a universal centre and thereby re-enacting the joining of earth to sky. It is this role of a powerful connecting focus that can account for the multiplicity of meanings attributed to the *ovaa* kurgans among the Kalmyks. As my material indicates, the mounds have come to function as the loci of patrilineal territories creating a shared feeling of belonging to both a certain family/clan and a particular place, as the key sites in fertility rites in which to ask for children and influence one's general well-being, as abodes of the pre-historic protectors of the steppe and therefore dangerous spaces of exclusion, as the domain of the White Old Man and the Buddhist pantheon visited by enlightened beings, as landforms of secrecy concealing Buddhist images and rituals during the persecution of religion, and also as vivid agents of religious and ethno-cultural renewal. Most crucially, however, kurgans act as powerful loci of history making by means of creative remembering, or interpretation of the traces of the past in the physical lived-in surroundings. The *ovaa* kurgans are indeed landscape entities with a narrative potency as they at once generate memories of the past (in the form of legends, oral histories, miracle stories, individual life-histories, etc.) and also produce new discourses, for example concerning archaeological excavations, Buddhist cosmological conceptions or questions of Kalmyk cosmopolitics. As this process is never complete and never ending, the mounds themselves appear as whirlpools of heterogenous narratives, manifesting a process of constant and largely chaotic creative remembering and producing multiple histories.

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## NOTES

1. In Kalmyk history books, August 1609 is marked as the official entry of the Oirats into Russia, when the first charter between the Russian Tsar, Vasilii Shuiskii, and the Oirat Khans, Ho-Orliuk and Dalai-Baatyr, was signed.

2. *Ovoo* is the transliteration of the Mongolian term in its current Cyrillic version. To render its spelling in the classical script, it is written as *obo*ya or *obo*. Here, I use *ovaa* because it is the transliteration of the Kalmyk word and also renders its current phonetic form.
3. In Mongolian, *tolgoi*, “head”, may refer to any distinctive height that rises above everything else, such as a hill standing separately or a prominent summit in a mountain range (e.g. Humphrey 1995, p. 144).
4. Interview with Eduard Shavinov, August 2012. For the meanings of the stupa, see Snodgrass (1985). Kalmyks often draw parallels between stupas and ritual cairns with regard to their meanings and certain structural elements.
5. The major layers in this tripartite cosmology are not homogenous, being further subdivided into numerous strata, such as subterranean layers of the underground and ethereal realms of the sky.
6. This perception of women is typical of the Mongol and Tibetan contexts (Humphrey 1993; Huber 1994a). Another explanation for female “impurity” is that in the exogamous clan society of the Mongols wives come from outside groups; being outsiders, they are excluded from the ancestral territories of their husbands’ patrilineages (Humphrey 2001, p. 62).
7. As elsewhere in Mongolia, *tsatsal* refers to a ritual sprinkling with milk, tea, vodka or other liquids as offerings to deities, and also denotes a wooden instrument used for libations (Muniev (ed.) 1977, p. 627).
8. According to the Kalmyk lunar calendar, the first summer month corresponds to late May and the first half of June.
9. This deity is definitely a key figure of Kalmyk religious life, with a number of new religious groups having developed whose practice is centred on his cult (Gazizova 2018, 2019).
10. Before the abolition of the Kalmyk ASSR in 1943, some part of what today is Astrakhan Oblast, including the region of the lake Baskunchak, belonged to Kalmykia. Even after the official restoration of the republic in 1958, this territory remained in Astrakhan.
11. The legend does not specify which Dalai Lama it was, referring rather to the idea of the worldly emanation of Avalokiteśvara (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs; Kalm. Aryabala), the bodhisattva of compassion.
12. Texts were compiled by Buddhist monastics prescribing the construction, classification and worship of the sacred cairns (Davaa-Ochir 2008), among the widely known being the 18<sup>th</sup> century composition by the Third Mergen Gegeen, Luvsan Dambi Jalsan (Tib. bLo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1717-1766) (Bawden 1958; Heissig 1980, pp. 104-105; Sneath 2007).
13. White Tārā and Green Tārā.
14. There is an opinion that the mound received this name long before the cremation of Donduk Dashi (Tserenov 2009).
15. The year 1929 is usually indicated as the official beginning of the Soviet archaeological research in Kalmykia.
16. For a systematic description of the early Tibetan earth tombs, see Tucci (1950).
17. The Scythians and Sarmatians were ancient nomadic peoples of Iranian origin that inhabited the southern Eurasian steppes from around the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.
18. For a discussion of “history of peoples” versus “history of territories” in the context of Altai, see Broz (2009).
19. According to Erdniev (1982, p. 53), its diameter at the foot was 130 m while its top was 40 m in diameter; the barrow was surrounded by a trench that was 20 m wide and 12,5 m deep.
20. The Orgakin patrilineages constituted the Orgakin aimak of the Manych ulus.
21. Its current name is the Kalmyk Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Science.
22. Most Sarmatian burials are reported to have been looted. For a complete archaeological description of the necropolis Kermen Tolga, see Erdniev (1982, pp. 53-84).

23. The latest burial mounds on the Kalmyk steppe are dated as of the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD, with the practice of constructing round earth tombs in the south of Russia documented to have stopped in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Erdniev 1982, p. 108).
24. See Wallace (2015) for the “agency” of sacred sites in Mongolia and Humphrey (2015) for the “cosmopolitical geography” of the Buryats in Russia.
25. In 2012, the so-called Ukok Princess was repatriated to Altai. The mummy is kept in a tomb-like structure in the National Museum of the Republic of Altai (e.g. Plets *et al.* 2013).
26. As was the case with the other Kalmyk monasteries of that epoch, it was of a mobile nomadic type. The first stationary temple was built in 1798 by Orchi Lama, the head of the Lamrimlin (Tib. Lam rim gling).
27. The new temple is registered under the name Orgakinskii Hurul “Bogdo Dalai Lamin Rashi Lunpo”.
28. These are the four cardinal directions (north, east, south and west), the four intermediate directions (northeast, southeast, southwest, northwest), the zenith and the nadir. According to another explanation, ten poles represent ten patrilineages that participated in the consecration worship.
29. Drawing parallels with Tibetans, an anonymous reviewer suggested that it could be perceived as a safe way to dispose of one’s nails that avoids the risk of people stepping on them.
30. *Setr* (Mo. *seter*; Tib. *tshé thar*) means “consecrated animal”. Instead of being killed, the animal is set free as an offering to a mountain or mound.
31. E.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDSWYKIXGYI> (last accessed March 2020).
32. The latter type is known as “mind treasures” (Tib. *dgongs gter*), conceived of as concealed and discovered in the mind. For “mind treasures” in Kalmykia, see Gazizova (2019).
33. Saperov was a supporter of the Renovationist movement, also known as the Buddhist reform movement, initiated among the Russian Buddhists by Agvan Dorzhiev (e.g. Sablin 2019). Saperov therefore advocated a strict observance of the *Vinaya* vows for monks and a so-called “pure life” among the laity, the latter involving abstinence from alcohol.
34. Analysing treasure discoveries in post-Soviet Buryatia, Bernstein (2011, pp. 640-644) notes that it is often in the ruins of former monasteries where Buddhist images are found. In Kalmykia, this role has been largely transmitted to the mounds, as even the ruins of former monasteries are virtually non-existent.
35. The *ḍākinī* (Tib. *mkha’ ’gro ma*) are a class of female divinities in Tibetan Buddhism, often linked to certain Tantric practices.
36. Interviews with Bemb Shantaev, Anja Gelüŋ and Elena Mandzhieva, September-October 2018; see also <https://vesti-kalmykia.ru/news/item/istoriya-shattinskoj-kollekcii-poluchila-prodolzhenie> (last accessed March 2020).
37. *Gelüŋ* is the Kalmyk variant of the Tibetan *dge slong*, which denotes a fully ordained Buddhist monk. Although both Namka and Zodva had to renounce their monastic vows, they are still locally referred to as *gelüŋ*.
38. Zodva Natyrov (1896-1994) was a former Buddhist monk and astrologer. He is particularly remembered for giving the mantra and initiations into practices of the White Old Man during late socialism.

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## ABSTRACTS

Since their migration to the northern Caspian, the Kalmyks have attributed the ritual, political and functional roles of the sacred cairns (Mo. *ovoo*, Kalm. *ovaa*) of Inner Asia to steppe kurgans, or ancient burial mounds that abound throughout the North Caucasus and Caspian Depression, the oldest dating from the early Bronze Age. This study is concerned with Kalmyk terminology, certain ritual practices and contemporary discourses constructing burial mounds as reference points of Kalmyk Buddhist cosmology and history. Focusing on two examples of particular mounds, I present popular narratives, some archaeological findings and recent public events in connection with the chosen sites in order to explore how these landscape entities are conceptualized as powerful agents of Kalmyk religious and ethno-cultural renewal. Whether *ovaa* kurgans can be situated within the category of the Inner Asian *ovoos* or whether they present a separate type of ritual structure is another set of questions the article raises.

Depuis leur migration vers la Caspienne septentrionale, les Kalmouks ont attribué les rôles rituels, politiques et fonctionnels des cairns sacrés (mo. *ovoo*, kalm. *ovaa*) d'Asie intérieure aux kurgans des steppes, anciens tumuli funéraires qui abondent dans tout le Caucase du Nord et la dépression Caspienne, les plus anciens datant du début de l'âge du bronze. Cette étude porte sur la terminologie kalmouke, sur certaines pratiques rituelles et sur les discours contemporains qui font des tumuli des points de référence de la cosmologie et de l'histoire bouddhiques kalmoukes. En me concentrant sur deux exemples de kurgans particuliers, je présente des récits populaires, des découvertes archéologiques et des événements publics récents en relation avec les sites particuliers, afin d'explorer comment ces entités du paysage sont conceptualisées comme des agents puissants du renouveau religieux et ethnoculturel kalmouk. Cet article soulève encore la question de savoir si les *ovaa* kurgans peuvent être placés dans la catégorie des *ovoo* d'Asie intérieure ou s'ils présentent un type distinct de structure rituelle.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** kurgan, *ovoo*, burial mound, landscape, Kalmyk, Buddhism, treasure, agency, memory, cosmopolitics

**Mots-clés:** kurgan, *ovoo*, tumulus, paysage, bouddhisme, kalmouk, trésor, agentivité, mémoire, cosmopolitique

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