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Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner
Asia, followed by Varia

On offering and forgiveness at Altan Ovoo's national Tahilga

Offrandes et pardon au Tahilga national d'Altan Ovoo

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Figure 1. Altan Ovoo enjoys a night concert

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- 1 In the summer of 2018, on the grassland steppe of Mongolia near the eastern border with China, the district of Dar'ganga played host to the quadrennial national offering

ceremony (*tahlilga*)¹ for the state-worshipped mountain² (*töriin tahlilgatai uul*) Altan Ovoo³. Altan Ovoo anchors the north end of the Dar'ganga territory: a lush volcanic grassland situated in the southeast of Sühbaatar Province. Dar'ganga is the ancestral territory (*nutag*) of the Dar'ganga sub-ethnic group and also contains the holy mountain Shiliin Bogd, a memorial to legendary horse thief and folk hero Toroi bandi⁴, Ganga Lake and Orgiliin Spring, Neolithic stone men monuments, a yearly swan migration, and a smattering of lesser ovoos, ice caves, and sand dunes. Though it sits north of the Gobi desert, its climate is markedly different, and the high acidity of its volcanic soil nurtures the lush grassland, which once fed the imperial herds of the Qing empire (1644-1911). However, the increasing frequency of drought and poor grazing conditions, coupled with the appearance of shadowy foreign mining interests and the recent availability of internet⁵ access in the town center has brought together local worries about desertification and discourses on global climate change, circulating with increasing intensity as the nearby Gobi encroaches. In August of 2018, these discourses centered on Altan Ovoo.

- 2 The 2018 offering national ceremony marked the 105th anniversary of Altan Ovoo's relationship with the Mongolian State (Bogd Haan period, 1911-1921). In 1913, just prior to the socialist era, Mongolia's theocratic ruler, the Eighth Zhavzandamba Hutagt or Bogd Haan (1869-1924)⁶ domesticated the former shamanic site known as Har Uul, and declared Altan Ovoo a venerated mountain of the Mongolian State. A version of this decree is currently reproduced in law, as Altan Ovoo became one of ten worshipped mountains protected by Presidential Decree (E.O. No. 32)⁷ in 2009⁸.
- 3 However, the figure of the mountain venerated in law belies the complexity of its being. There is contention among scholars, religious practitioners, and lay worshippers about what exactly sets Altan Ovoo apart from other mountains in the region, and even what the name "Altan Ovoo" refers to. In this paper, I operate on a definition that hews closest to the understanding my friends, coworkers, and interlocutors in Dar'ganga have explained to me.
- 4 The name "Altan Ovoo" refers to three seemingly distinct, but phenomenologically integrated things: 1) the material form of the mountain itself; 2) the stone ovoo and the mandala structure (fig. 3) constructed at its summit; and 3) the ineffable being that makes the mountain fit for worship, what would be called a *lus*⁹, "spirit of locality" (*savdag*), or master or sovereign of a locality (*gazaryn ezen*) in most parts of Mongolia, but in Dar'ganga is called "sky, heavens" (*tenger*) or more commonly just Altan Ovoo. I argue that calling the mountain by its name¹⁰, often in moments of panic or surprise, is an act of familiarity that illustrates Altan Ovoo's place in spaces and scales far more intimate than the State offering.
- 5 My frame for discussing the nature of relations between human worshippers and a mountain worthy of worship draws on the concept of geosociality, which describes how non-living mineral forms (volcanoes, isotopes, mudslides, and so on) are included in social life. This concept emerged from discussions held within the Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene (AURA) working group, which I attended in early 2017. These discussions revealed two gaps in the global Anthropocene conversation: attention to non-secular or supernatural agencies (Bubandt 2018), and attention to geology and non-living landscapes. While a great amount of research in environmental anthropology has focused on multispecies ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010) and biosociality, work in geosociality takes this sensibility further by highlighting the

“comingling of the geologic and the social” (Palsson & Swanson 2016). This might include the cosmopolitics of revered mountains (Cadena 2015), regimes of power in extracted landscapes (Povinelli 2016), or volcanic eruption as an agent of change (Dove 2008).

- 6 This article engages with the geosociality of Altan Ovoo on three distinct but integrated levels: First, I will give a brief ethnographic recounting of the uncertainties that emerged during the 2018 national offering ceremony at Altan Ovoo. Second, I will draw on the local imaginaries of Altan Ovoo and the Dar’ganga area, gathered from three years of discussions (2011-2013 and 2017-2018), informal interviews, and walks around the mountain with local worshippers in Dar’ganga and greater Sühbaatar Province. I will also draw on the mountain’s presence in literature by members of the Gal (“Fire”) group, a 20th century Dar’ganga poetic movement. I use these sources to argue that Altan Ovoo maintains an enchanted intimacy with humans that exists as a result of a pre-existing collaborative relationship between humans and geological bodies. Altan Ovoo is like an ovoo on a greater scale – similar to the distinct rock piles that dot mountain summits and roadsides across the Mongolian landscape. Like a stone cairn, Altan Ovoo was created through a process of accretion driven by an integrated amalgamation of geological volcanic forces and human desire to engage intimately with stone. This collaborative relationship expands on understanding the Mongolian landscape as populated by beings with varying abilities (Humphrey 1995) and argues that part of the social ecology of Dar’ganga is comprised of humans, mountains, and others working together, flouting imagined boundaries between nature, culture, and supernature. Third and finally, I will illustrate that maintenance of this vital relationship is predicated on repeated acts of devotion, injury, sacrifice, and forgiveness that include the national offering ceremony. As discourses around the scope of human agency and responsibility in the context of global climate change circulate, and as Altan Ovoo sustains more and greater local injuries, anxiety around the health of this vital human/geo relation proliferates. The 2018 national offering ceremony, held in the context of mining scandals, political corruption, and generalized climate anxiety, became a center point for discussions about what might happen if this relationship reached its end. I then end the paper with a provocation: what happens when forgiveness is expected but not granted? What happens when relations with something as steadfast as a mountain break down for good?

The national offering ceremony

Figure 2. A crowd gathers at dawn around the foot of Altan Ovoo

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- 7 Altan Ovoo's national offering ceremony began at dawn the morning of August 27th, 2018. The previous night had seen the population of the Dar'ganga District center explode, and a volunteer policeman I spoke to while he was directing traffic commented that it "was basically the same as UB¹¹ right now". The air was full of dust and tents lined the grassy shores of Holboo and Ganga Lakes. Concerns about what these masses of city folk might do preceded the actual event by over a year. Even so, the concerns were never leveled at the character of Ulaanbaatar residents themselves, as so many of them had relatives in Dar'ganga, or even lived there part time. Worries revolved more around Ulaanbaatar as a point of human amassment: the problem was not that a person might litter or wash their car in the lake. On a small scale these foibles could be smoothed over. Rather, the issue was that thousands would. Signs were erected at the entrance to the Dar'ganga town center encouraging visitors to pick up their trash and mind their vehicles.
- 8 Preparations for the 2018 Altan Ovoo's national offering ceremony represented a tipping point in that they were the first to directly engage with discussions of conservation and global climate change. Conservation-focused billboards encouraged attendees to protect the purity of their homeland, and announcements were made reminding everyone to pick up their trash, to be mindful of car-wash runoff, and to not leave offerings such as dairy and prayer flags (*hadag*)¹² outside of designated collection areas. For months prior to the national offering ceremony, locals in Dar'ganga and in Sühbaatar generally had been openly worrying about the impact the large crowds would have on their environment. Despite anecdotal reports that suggested that the crowds of visitors had had less environmental impact, the lack of the appearance of rain in the wake of the National Offering Ceremony, signaling that the offering was

successful, suggested something larger, a confirmation of anxieties that went beyond litter, but looped into greater discourses about climate change in the *longue durée*.

- 9 At dawn on the morning of the 27th, the “first stage of the national offering ceremony” commenced, “dedicated to the sun and the reading of holy texts”¹³. The paved area at the foot of Altan Ovoo was sparsely populated, but gained strength as the sun rose, ringing in the second stage, “dedicated to Altan Dar’ Ovoo’s Divine Kingdom of Heaven”¹⁴. Shortly after sunrise, groups of harried women began moving plastic folding tables up to the front of the crowd, each adorned with a printed-out sheet of paper designating them to each district: Bayandelger, Halzan, Asgat, and so on. Once they had been properly set up, volunteers began stacking them with piles of candy, cartons of milk, biscuits and cookies, and other offerings to the mountain. Sühbaatar-born Prime Minister Hürelsüh joined the ritual, as well as the province governor, other local politicians, and soldiers bussed in from Ulaanbaatar in full regalia. These soldiers stood beside an enormous thangka depiction of White Tārā, the “Dar’ Eh” of Altan Dar’ Ovoo, and of Dar’ganga. From the foot of the thangka, a long red carpet stretched to the end of the concrete platform at the foot of the mountain, roped off from the crowd by stanchions connected with plastic chains. Along the top edge of the carpet sat the lamas, reciting prayers in Tibetan from texts laid out on short tables in front of them. The crowd listened to the lamas recite sutras for half an hour or so before groups of men began to walk off to the right and women to the left. The men started their climb up Toroi bandi’s path to the two structures at the summit: a mandala construction and a stone cairn while the women began our clockwise circumambulations and conversation around the mountain¹⁵. Though I couldn’t see it, I had heard that a white horsehair standard¹⁶ had been brought all the way from the Government House in Ulaanbaatar, though with the caveat that it was “one of the smaller ones” or “probably a fake” according to a man who had been standing behind me in the crown moments earlier. An older woman in a pollution air mask paused to watch the silhouettes of the men ascend in a line up the side of the mountain. “Isn’t that nice to see!” , she commented. Over the course of the 90-minutes it takes to circle the mountain, we passed each other a handful of times and made small talk. She paused occasionally on the path to pick up little pieces of trash. “So many tourists and their litter!”, she muttered. “We didn’t use to have to do this. They’re going to ruin the lake with all this trash”, she sighed. “Ulaanbaatar people”. She untangled a silvery Lotte Choco Pie wrapper from a patch of grass and followed the gesture by flinging a handful of millet as an offering to soothe the insult.
- 10 That night, I went with my hosts to see the festival (*naadam*, three manly games) “night concert”. Walking along towards the stage that had been set up at the base of Altan Ovoo, I heard the sound system before I saw it – piping out arcs of careening operatic voices that bounced off the mountain and blasted out into the darkening steppe. The concert for the first night of *naadam* was to celebrate the success of the national offering ceremony’s work (*azhil*) that had been done that morning. There was a self-congratulatory speech by the province governor and Hürelsüh, and the night culminated in a performance by a dance troupe from the province’s Zhahan Sharga theater. The performance reached its zenith when a group of male dancers pulled together in the center of the stage, clasping their hands, bowing their heads, and twisting their bodies together until they formed the recognizable curve of Altan Ovoo – which appeared to me like a human tableau against the grassy backdrop of the mountain cloaked in darkness. The night closed with a public dance party to ABBA’s

greatest hits, held on the newly constructed concrete square at the foot of the mountain. I hung out on the edge of the revelry with Ganaa and Hulan, my hosts in Dar'ganga, and their teenage children. "Do you think Altan Ovoo likes ABBA?" I half-jokingly asked Hulan as she distributed grilled meat (*shorlog*) among the small crowd. "Of course!", she replied, "Altan Ovoo loves music, and people!"

- 11 The next morning, a hot fog rolled into Dar'ganga. Precipitation and heat are not uncommon during summer in the region, but they rarely come together. This was not a recognizable cold white fog that accompanied summer rain. Instead it was thin, dingy and stiflingly hot and sticky. Even stranger than the sudden presence of the fog was the absence of rain – the signal of a successful ceremony. Talk around town that began as mild disturbance only intensified as the heat increased and no rain came, even as it was promised and expected: by drivers, shopkeepers, my hosts and their visiting family. "It's going to rain tomorrow". No rain. "It will definitely rain by Friday". Still none. By the time I left Dar'ganga, there was still no rain and there would not be for many weeks to come.

More-than-ovoo

Figure 3. Young men from Sühbaatar at the foot of the Altan Ovoo's mandala

The mandala is a replica of small three-dimensional mandalas on which devotees offer grains and other offerings, but also evokes a stupa

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- 12 The power of ovoos at large and their forceful assemblage of spirits of the land and sky ranges from that of nationally worshipped mountains to simple, common ovoos. This force can be harnessed (Empson 2011) through the management and mediation of a

web of connections: between the human and non-human actors it encounters, between realms of existence, between ancestors and descendants, etc. This connective power is generated via the process of being and having been “piled up” (*ovoolson*). This refers to a process of accretion (Smith 2015) by which energy, fortune and value are collected, consolidated, and redistributed via a system of intensifying exchange in which the material is collected (as stones, sand, wood, etc.) and the immaterial is redistributed (as fortune, destiny, energy, value, etc.).

- 13 Altan Ovoo, despite having been formed up by ancient eruptions of a volcanic field rather than shaped by human hands, has nevertheless still undergone a process of accretion through exchange and interaction with humans. Throughout my discussions about landscape with my interlocutors, I was encouraged to read the work of Dar’ganga poets. Jantanhorlo, a literature teacher in Baruun-Urt, explained to me: “In order to understand the Dar’ganga idea of nature on a philosophical level, you would do well to read some Dar’ganga poets”. Specifically, he handed me an essay entitled “I discovered my motherland/My discovered motherland” (*Minii neesen eh oron*) in which Dar’ganga poet¹⁷ O. Dashbalbar (1983) describes the mountain’s origins:

Altan Ovoo truly is a living mountain. People have loved and worshiped this mountain for centuries, and over many years the thoughts of hundreds of thousands of people have become a single point – concentrated on this mountain. Saturated with everyone’s faith and desire, it was thus transformed from a simple mountain into the love of the motherland. Well, my ancestors did not worship this mountain in vain! [...] This symbol of eternal love must come to us: it is Dar’ganga’s Altan Ovoo! (Dashbalbar 1983, p. 234, my translation)

- 14 Tamirjavyn argued that in Dar’ganga, the term *ovoo* that signifies the material body of the mountain and the *ovoo* that refers to the supernatural entity or sky (*tenger*), should be thought of as separate bodies, separate entities (Tamirjavyn 2017, p. 265). However, among my lay interlocutors the material mountain and its immaterial affects are fully integrated. Altan Ovoo is fully material, but it manages to sometimes behave in immaterial ways. Its multiple and overlapping cosmological affiliations coexist without conflict because it is first and foremost a mountain. Much like its human worshippers it is comfortable with multiplicity, able to participate in both cosmology and politics without succumbing to the prison of belief or dogmatic party affiliations.
- 15 Altan Ovoo, like the public assembled in Dar’ganga last summer, participates in the offering ceremony cosmopolitically (Sneath 2014). However, I want to caution against defaulting to animism as an explanation for non-human personhood or the political agency of non-living beings. In this, I keep with many scholars within Mongolian and Siberian Studies, who challenge animism as being an etic academic discourse that is prone to flattening the network of power relations between humans and non-humans in relations of coexistence on the landscape (Buyandelger 2013; High 2017; Pedersen 2011; Willerslev 2013). I also follow Elizabeth Povinelli’s assertion that challenging the categories of life and non-life by declaring everything alive holds a similar danger of flattening (2016). This is both complicated and underlined by conversations with my interlocutors in Dar’ganga and elsewhere, who will refer to Altan Ovoo and other non-living geological bodies as “alive” in English but not in Mongolian, instead using terms like “energetic”, “magnetic”, or “loving”. This follows Caroline Humphrey’s (1995) assertion that the steppe landscape is made up of interacting energies of varying abilities – not necessarily alive but able to interact with one another in such a way as to make measurable “results”.

- 16 Davaasüren (Davaa), an English teacher who lives in the Sühbaatar Province capital of Baruun-Urt, traces her family's relationship with Altan Ovoo back to before socialism – at least four generations. Her mother's ancestors, she explained to me, were once very poor, but nevertheless, they sacrificed much of what little they had to the mountain. Over the years, they became wealthy. Now she feels her destiny is likewise bound up in her relationship with Altan Ovoo, just as it is bound up with other networks of relation with persons who shape her life.
- 17 The night before I set out for Dar'ganga to see the offering ceremony, I asked Davaa if she could remember the first time she visited the mountain. She could – it was 2008 and she had just graduated university. She went to ask for her first job. Out of this memory spilled many more, and she lamented not being able to visit the last few years:
- [Altan Ovoo is] a very wishful mountain. It's so very magnetic. For example, I haven't visited Altan Ovoo for three years since that time we visited when I was pregnant. So now these latest days I have missed Altan Ovoo so much. I dreamed about Altan Ovoo – not every day but maybe a single time once a week or once a month. I mentioned to you about my dream – that's very religious in Mongolia. If you dream about Altan Ovoo the Altan Ovoo misses you and they call you. They call their children or they – you know. That's what we think. And then I went to the monastery in autumn. Last autumn. I talked about these dreams to the lama – he's a good lama – and he said "You should visit Altan Ovoo or you should pray to Altan Ovoo and you should give away some nice things – you know like top cream layer of fresh milk [*deezh*] and candy [*chiher*]. At least you should do this because Altan Ovoo misses you and that's the thing. That's the thing. At least you should do this".
- 18 Davaa describes the pull of Altan Ovoo as magnetism, pulling in its "children" both human and non-human. Horses are said to gain energy from the mountain and are brought up to the summit before big races. Likewise, the black volcanic rocks that scatter the land around the base of the mountain, if removed, only desire to return home and can bring bad luck to the person who removed them. Davaa also tells the story of a relative of her mother who suffered misfortune after taking home a small black volcanic rock from the base of the mountain. "Children want to be with their mother" she said. The stone was returned and peace once again settled on the household.
- 19 Altan Ovoo is known as a gentle (*zöölön*) mountain, and usually does not demonstrate the wrathfulness of another subordinate worshipped mountain in the province. The most salient example is Halzan Ovoo, which murdered two successive governors and burned down the district's government building in 2012 (Tamirjavyn 2017, p. 265). It is difficult to imagine Altan Ovoo ever becoming wrathful (*hilegneh*) with its children, which is why the lack of rain after the 2018 offering ceremony was so broadly alarming. The intimate pull between the worshipped mountain and its humans is highly particularized, embodied, and affective. Many Sühbaatar residents imagine their unfolding destinies as entangled with their personal history with Altan Ovoo.

"We will not forgive"

Figure 4. A fog rolls in

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- 20 By the end of the offering ceremony's festival (*tahilga naadam*), an uncanny element had transformed the atmosphere, both meteorological and discursive. Walking through the center of Dar'ganga, one could catch snippets of conversation between passersby as they walked down the street:
- This weather must be smog from all those Ulaanbaatar people's cars.
I hear them say it would rain tomorrow.
Maybe somebody made a mistake reading those books.
It still hasn't rained.
Aren't you hot? I'm so hot!
- 21 Tired of sweating, I decided to skip the last day of the festival's horse races and instead head back to Baruun-Urt a day early in order to spend some time visiting with Sarnai, the owner of a nightclub in the province center. Pulling into town around midnight, I first noticed the clear absence of humidity, and second the familiar smell of Baruun Urt at night: the edge of a rusty knife – the smell of processing ore that occasionally drifted over from the zinc mine upwind.
- 22 For a long time, the mining economy of Sühbaatar had mostly centered on Tömörtiin Ovoo zinc mine, an enterprise owned by the Chinese company Tsairt LLC. This company was one of the province's primary employers since 2004, and by 2013 the zinc mine had provided Sühbaatar, once one of the country's poorest provinces, with a stretch of prosperity and a burst of local development. During the two years I had spent living in Baruun Urt (2011-2013), the mine drew no more controversy than any other foreign-owned mine in Mongolia. In fact, Tsairt LLC was one of the premier sponsors of both the 2018 and 2013 National Tahilga.

- 23 In recent years, rumors have been swirling around the exploration of a new uranium vein near Altan Ovoo, including one that suggested that the offering ceremony itself had been pushed back a year¹⁸ to distract from the work being done by foreign geological teams. The idea that mineral extraction is not only capable of immeasurable acceleration but also that it is being done outside of the rule of law has led to an analogous intensification of political and environmental contestation that no longer sees foreign extractive interests as having appetites that can be managed, but rather as destructive and ecologically apocalyptic forces¹⁹. Prior to a few Buddhist-led protests in Sühbaatar District in 2017 that remained mostly locally reported, anti-mining sentiment in Sühbaatar remained sporadic or marginal at most.
- 24 Before the offering national ceremony, I had read this ambivalence as having to do with managing economic risk or perhaps holding a non-binary view of Nature and Culture – challenging the assumptions of western European landscape philosophy that paints the natural environment as sacred and human intervention as profane. However, after observing the anxieties that emerged in the aftermath of the offering ceremony, it became apparent that rather than (or in addition to) pragmatism, the attitudes of Dar'ganga and Sühbaatar residents towards the landscape had much more to do with a unique sort of relationality. This relationality between humans and their geological landscape is based on a frank and honest understanding of intimacy as necessarily containing not only a capacity for both harm and reconciliation, but that these affective cycles are inherent to the existence of relationality itself.
- 25 Contained within every relationship is the possibility that things may fall apart. Earlier in this paper, I described an example of how relations between Altan Ovoo and what Davaa calls its human “children” are built on cycles of harm, repair, and forgiveness that sometimes play out for centuries – ebbing and flowing along ancestral lines. There are also newer relationships, some less than a decade old, that nevertheless become part of the vast relational web between human beings and the mountain. A few years ago, on a phone call between Mongolia and the United States, Davaa asked me if I had been missing and remembering Altan Ovoo. I answered that I had, but that I was so far away I doubt it made a difference. “It makes a difference!” she replied, “You were introduced to Altan Ovoo, and even if you are gone for so many years, Altan Ovoo will always remember your face”.
- 26 This memory is not static, however. The primary affective quality of the relationships between Altan Ovoo and what Davaa and others call its “children” is that of an intimate push and pull. Over time, which for some can be over many generations and for others, such as myself, might only stretch over decade or so, there are inevitably slights and harms committed.
- 27 This is not a relation of even reciprocity as between two equals, but a relation in the register of filial hierarchy. When I asked Sarnai, a local nightclub owner in Baruun-Urt, about what it might feel like to disappoint Altan Ovoo, she replied with a laugh “It’s a bad feeling, but not dangerous. It’s like a child who disappoints their parents by attending the wrong university. Of course, they’re angry, and you’ll have to make it up to them, but they still love you”. In the era of global climate change, human harm to the landscape is as inevitable as a child disappointing their parents, and as human intervention is inevitable, ameliorating rituals must proliferate. These harms can range from taking a stone from the mountain without permission to failing to provide for its proper care to industrial mining. Regardless, the harm must be made right, especially

since the expectation of forgiveness is contained in this act of repair, especially with a mountain as gentle as Altan Ovoo.

- 28 These acts of repair are best described with the Mongolian term *argadah*, meaning “to sooth”, “coax”, or “make it up to”. This term is not only useful in the geosocial sphere, to describe the practice of reading sutras to the land after it has been broken, but also in human/human relations (such as bringing a dozen roses to a lover after a fight) and human/animal relations (such as convincing a mother camel to nurse a rejected baby). This is similar to the rituals used to sooth the spirits and ancestors who reside on the landscape and on ovoo in general.
- 29 In this article, I suggest that the offering ceremony is likewise an act of sooth, coax, or make it up to, only done on a national scale. The nation engages in an act of worship in order to receive confirmation from the mountain that despite any wrongs that have been committed, the relationship is maintained. The offering here is not so much a giving up as a giving in – a willingness to have stakes in a relationship with a non-human geological being, not necessarily alive but enlivened through historical cycles of intimate relationality. Davaa, as well as others in Dar’ganga and Sühbaatar narrate their personal and family histories with Altan Ovoo as being full of harm and forgiveness, desire, faithfulness, reward, conflict and soothing – just as with any relationship between enlivened things: humans or non-humans.
- 30 In discussing Altan Ovoo’s capacity for intimate relationality with humans, I do not presume to suggest any of us humans are able to reliably read the intention or character of an inscrutable stone form that is thousands of years old. Rather I suggest that this is an understanding of the nature of the “relationship” between Altan Ovoo and its children, including its capacity to withstand and be strengthened through these cycles of harm, sacrifice, forgiveness, repair and recovery.
- 31 Govindrajan discusses the comingling and codependence of love, violence, and sacrifice in recounting stories of women who had been “taken” (sexually abducted) by bears. While initially thinking these were stories about rape, upon greater discussion it became clear that these were stories reflecting certain truths about marriage and “the ambiguous nature of the violence that inflected [the encounter between woman and bear or husband and wife]” (Govindrajan 2018 p. 153). Likewise, violence is sedimented into the relationship between humans and the mountains they relate with. Worshipped mountains have always had the potential for retributive anger, even gentle ones like Altan Ovoo. Not every mountain is Halzan Ovoo, murdering its human relations for petty corruption; however, even the most gentle and permissive relationships have a breaking point. In my years of discussing the attitudes of community members towards their own relationships with the environment, I have found that the idea that things could really and truly break down forever is fairly recent, and marks a new and pervasive anxiety that is more intense from the known uncertainties that are contained within the framework of religious cosmology or rules of relation with non-human persons. As the discourse of global climate change entered Dar’ganga’s community consciousness, so did the notion of total breakdown. In addition to all the socio-political uncertainties of post-socialism and neoliberalism (Buyandelger 2013), now there is the added uncertainty of climate change, which makes things almost unbearable.
- 32 Shortly after I left Mongolia that summer, demonstrations were being held in Ulaanbaatar’s Sühbaatar Square calling for the resignation of parliamentary speaker

Enhbold Miyegombo. Protestors gathered in the square, carrying signs that read “We do not forgive” (*Bid Uchlaagüi*). These protests, brought on by the twin crises of a corruption scandal and terrible urban air pollution, signaled a total loss of trust in the parliamentary government. In an article for Jacobin magazine, Sanchir Jargalsaihan (Sorace & Jargalsaihan 2019) compares the Mongolian citizenry’s loss of the capacity to forgive as an example of what Berlant calls “Crisis Ordinarity”. Acts that were previously considered “business as usual” from political corruption to a successful offering ceremony, are no longer sustainable. The confluence of the 2018 protests with the emergent anxiety of a possibly unsuccessful national offering ceremony illustrate the ways in which the traumas of corruption, air pollution, and unchecked extraction have transformed the relational capacity of Mongolian publics, both human and non-human, who find themselves in the midst of a collective and historic moment of reckoning.

- 33 The engine of global climate change runs on the rending and transforming of long-established relations between humans and others, and the global reach of its various structures of alienation go far beyond the frame that once contained the human potential for sin. If relations between humans and landscape could be severed on a global scale, of course they could be severed in Dar’ganga – as the poet G. Mend-Ooyo (1993) writes, Altan Ovoo is “the world on a reduced scale”. Here then lies the question: where is the place that the relation can break? What new forms of making relations will emerge in the aftermath of these crises? In the context of anthropogenic climate change, where the relation between humans and the environment has accelerated and intensified repeating cycles of violation and harm, where does the onus of not-forgiveness lie? In Dar’ganga, it lies with Altan Ovoo.

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NOTES

1. There are many possible translations in English of *tahlilga*, none of which are sufficient. For the purpose of this article I have chosen the term “sacrifice”, and I use the term *tahlilga* to refer both to the national ceremony and as a general term for other ceremonies like it. For an extensive discussion on issues in Mongolian to English translation, please see my forthcoming dissertation (Madison Piskata 2021).

2. I use the term “worshipped mountain” rather than the commonly used “sacred mountain” here for a number of reasons: first, I feel it to be a better translation of the Mongolian word *tahilgatai*. Second, I use it to distinguish Altan Ovoo from other “sacred mountains” (for example Halzan Ovoo) in the region as being connected to the state in a particular way. Third, I wish to avoid terms that may allow for false equivocations with other human/mountain relations in other parts of the world. Marisol de la Cadena (2015) cautions against these kinds of equivocations, specifically around the subject of mountains. Just as the imperfect term “Earth Beings” is particular to her discussion of Andean *ayllu* and cannot be applied to different mountain contexts, so the Mongolian “state-worshipped mountain” is an imperfect translation particular to present-day Mongolia.

3. Also known as Altan-Dar’ Ovoo or Dar’ Ovoo, forming the center of the Dar’ganga region along with Ganga Lake. In this case, the term *ovoo* refers to both the mountain itself as well as the two structures at the summit: a stone and a mandala, the latter being a hybrid stone/stupa structure. The golden spire (*ganjir*) adorning the mandala is rumored to be how the mountain got its name.

4. The “Mongolian Robin Hood”, Toroi bandi is legendary for raiding the cattle and horse stocks of wealthy landowners and Qing tax collectors in the Dar’ganga region under the Qing, most likely in the mid-19th century. He became beloved by the local population by redistributing the bulk of the wealth he collected on his raids (hence his comparison with Robin Hood). Toroi bandi was arrested repeatedly, but always managed to escape or avoid capture by fleeing to secret hiding places in the Dar’ganga landscape. There is a statue in his honor tucked into the crest of a mountain near Ganga Nuur (lake), and it is a regular pilgrimage site for visitors to the region.

5. The local primary school has provided free Wi-Fi to residents during the school year since 2013, and another semi-reliable Wi-Fi hotspot was recently installed in the town Culture Center.

6. The Zhavzandamba Hutagt served as Mongolia’s preeminent reincarnated lama, third in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.

7. This includes Altai Tavan Bogd, Altan Höhii Mountain, Bogd Hairhan Mountain, Burhan Haldun Mountain, Altan Ovoo, Gov’ Gurvan Saihan, Han Höhii, Otgontenger Hairhan, and Sütai Hairhan Mountain.

8. President P. Ochirbat issued the initial decree protecting Bogd Hairhan, Han Hentii, and Otgontenger Hairhan in 1995, to be added to in later years.

9. A local nature spirit, often found in water. Sometimes defined as a “nymph” or “naiad” or described as a dragon or snake.

10. As Altan Ovoo is known to be a particularly gentle mountain with whom people feel intimately connected, it is not called by the euphemistic *hairhan*, a term used when referring to more ferocious/wrathful mountains to avoid offense.

11. Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia and home to nearly half the country’s population.

12. The term *hadag* commonly designates a “ceremonial scarf”. However, since in this case they were being used in the context of a state ceremony and were being affixed to an object in order to flap in the wind, I have chosen to use the term flags.

13. Lam huvaraguud narny tahlilga üidezh, altan dar’, ovoony san, tahlilgyn nom hurna.

14. Altan dar’ ovoony tengeriig taih töriin tahlilgyn yoslolyn üil azhillaga ehlene.

15. The space of Altan Ovoo is gendered in the way of many Mongolian revered mountains, in which men are allowed to ascend to the *ovoo* on the summit and women are either restricted to the foot of the mountain (as with Altan Ovoo) or to another cairn midway up the mountainside (as with Han Bayanzürh in Sainshand, Dornogov’ Province). There are some mountains that are open to all genders (such as Shiliin Bogd in Dar’ganga or Bogd Han outside Ulaanbaatar). There are also a few mountain summits that are open to women and forbidden to men, mostly in northwestern Daur areas (Atwood 2004, p. 136). There is no single theory explaining the origin of this practice, but laypeople usually cite one of two concerns: 1) that the immaterial beings populating the summit pose a danger to female reproductive capacity (especially if pregnant), or

2) that the character of the mountain is not amenable to rule-breaking or pollution and will punish the interloper and surrounding community for the indiscretion. This theory hues closely to warnings against cluttering the mountain with litter or engaging in unclean or corrupt political behavior in the mountain's name (see the reaction of Halzan Mountain later in this paper). This restriction was abolished as part of the modernization efforts during the socialist era (see also Rofel 1999 on the connection between women's rights and modernity in China).

16. One of the peacetime banners used by the Chinggisid rulers but produced in the 1990s.

17. In 2018, the controversial political life of Dashbalbar the man has taken a back seat in the Dar'ganga imagination to the image of Dashbalbar the ancestor. Very little is said among Dar'ganga locals of his nationalist or anti-feminist policies, and he has become a bit of a trickster figure, somewhat in the vein of legendary Dar'ganga horse thief Toroi bandi or Gobi Saint Fifth Noyon hutagt Dulduityn Danzanravzhaa (1803-1856). Nowadays, he is mostly brought up in his capacity as a poet or a populist, usually by telling the story of how he commuted to work at the Parliament in Ulaanbaatar by city bus. His political machinations are usually limited to his being broadly anti-extractivist, especially in discussions of the Oyu Tolgoi mining project.

18. Adhering to the mandated schedule of a holding the offering national ceremony at Altan Ovoo every four years would have seen the celebration held in 2017.

19. See the environmental post-apocalyptic music video "Homeland" by Ulaanbaatar rapper Big Gee ft. Jonon, where bands of wanderers in rags sift through the dust of an apocalyptic and desertified landscape to find photographs of the landscape as it once was (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qulmJ4Cqh8>, accessed 24 March 2020).

ABSTRACTS

In 2018, on the grassland steppe of eastern Mongolia, the district of Dar'ganga played host to the national "sacrifice" ceremony (*tahlga*) for the "worshipped mountain" Altan Ovoo. This paper engages with the geosociality of Altan Ovoo and Dar'ganga to ask what happens when relations between humans and geological bodies that are characterized by longstanding exchanges of affect, sacrifice, desire, and forgiveness break down in the face of accelerated anthropogenic degradation.

En 2018, dans la steppe de l'est de la Mongolie, le district de Dar'ganga a accueilli la cérémonie de « sacrifice » (*tahlga*) national pour la « montagne vénérée » Altan Ovoo. Cet article aborde la géosocialité d'Altan Ovoo et du district de Dar'ganga pour comprendre ce qui se passe lorsque les relations entre les humains et les corps géologiques, caractérisées par des échanges sur le long terme d'affect, de sacrifices, de désirs et de pardons, s'effondrent devant une dégradation anthropique accélérée.

INDEX

Keywords: Mongolia, post-socialism, anthropology, extraction, religion, climate change, environmental humanities, poetry, post-humanism

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