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

With each pass, another stone. Ovoo at the heart of heritage, environment, and conflict

*À chaque passage, une autre pierre. L'ovoo au cœur du patrimoine, de
l'environnement et des conflits*

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K. G. Hutchins

Introduction

- 1 There is a legend that has come up countless times in my interviews with Mongolian heritage bearers that says that long in the past, people would unknowingly encamp near wrathful mountains¹. The mountains, offended by the humans' careless trespass, would bring down calamities upon them. So, the people put up ovoos, spiritually significant piles of stone, to identify these mountains and let others know the rules for engaging with them. I bring up this story not to assert a claim to origins, but to highlight the role of ovoos as advocates on behalf of humans. These ritually significant structures translate the wills, needs, and behaviors of people and mountains to one-another and thereby mitigate conflicts between the two.
- 2 Ovoos are sacred heaps, usually made from piles of stone or collections of branches tied together by ritual scarves. Throughout Mongolia many spiritually significant areas, especially mountains and major water features, are marked by ovoos of various sizes. A common form of worship at ovoos is to walk clockwise around the structure three times, picking up stones from the ground and tossing them on the pile as you make your silent circumambulation. Through this act, worshipping the mountain becomes a process of building the ovoo itself.
- 3 The ovoo works through accruing new stones, along with a variety of offerings. Common offerings include teacups, Buddhist icons, horse skulls, and scarves. A comprehensive list of potential offerings is impossible, as people give offerings that

represent their own personal needs. Ovoos also vary widely in terms of spiritual purpose, with specialized offerings to match. Furthermore, ongoing debates of what are and are not appropriate offerings are themselves part of the ovoos tradition. Food offerings of milk, candy, or rice are especially contentious as they draw non-human scavengers to the ovoos. Not all offerings are immediately physically evident, as musical performances are also common forms of ovoos worship.

- 4 Ovoos are constantly growing structures that bring together the wills of humans, sacred landscapes, and animals and plants. Humans source the material to create and expand ovoos from local nonhumans: trees, stones, and occasionally livestock. While people use the ovoos to commune with and ask for protection from mountains and lakes, animals like small rodents and birds make their homes in and atop the pile.
- 5 In 2017, ovoos worship, included in a broad set of Mongolian land veneration traditions, was added to UNESCO's list of "Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding" (UNESCO 2017). Ovoos also figure prominently in the files detailing the cultural and spiritual importance of natural heritage inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, such as the "Orkhon Valley cultural landscape" (UNESCO 2004) and the "Great Burhan Haldun mountain and its surrounding sacred landscape" (UNESCO 2015a). These inclusions implicate ovoos in an international politics of heritage management and preservation. Though above I have presented generalized examples of the proper care and management of ovoos, in practice people have different ideas about their meanings and use.
- 6 Furthermore, the inclusion of ovoos worship on an international list of heritage opens up the practice to scrutiny from an international community of heritage administrators and enthusiasts. Handler argues that heritage researchers objectify cultural processes through reporting on them (Handler 1988, p.15), placing me, an American anthropologist, as part of this community of Mongolian heritage consumers. Local and international conflicts between humans over ovoos are further complicated by the material conditions and desires of the nonhumans involved.
- 7 In this article I ask what there is to learn about heritage from thinking through the multispecies engagements that play out the maintenance of ovoos. I draw on participant-observation and semi-structured interviews which I carried out over the course of twenty months between 2016-2018 in central Mongolia, in association with the American Center for Mongolian Studies and the Mongolian State University of Arts and Culture. In this article I will draw on the perspectives of "heritage bearers", people for whom the practices recognized as cultural heritage by UNESCO listed above (either long-song, traditional land veneration, or both) are central to their personal and/or professional lives. In keeping with the ethical agreement under which I conducted my research, I will protect the identities of the people who appear in these stories by referring to them with pseudonyms. First, I detail the experiences of a heritage bearer and hunting guide, who I will refer to as Bayar, to explore a case in which contestation on how best to maintain an ovoos in an environmentally and spiritually sustainable way opens up a space for negotiations of eco-spiritual practice. Then I turn to the stories of two musicians involved in the heritage music industry in Ulaanbaatar, a "horse-fiddle" (*morin huur*) player I will refer to as Tüvshee and a singer I will call Zulaa, examining how they use ovoos to spiritually mitigate financial instability and avoid health crises. Finally, this chapter returns to Bayar to examine how ovoos spring up simultaneously as

memorials of violence and caretakers of nonhumans in the form of ghosts and birds in the ruins of a monastery.

Natural, tangible, and intangible heritage

- 8 UNESCO maintains distinct lists for identifying heritage, originally dividing the concept into “natural heritage”, socially significant and unique environmental zones, and “cultural heritage”, architectural monuments of social and historical significance (UNESCO 1972). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s UNESCO’s approach to cultural heritage underwent what Bortolotto describes as an increasing shift toward thinking of culture in terms of ongoing processes rather than fixed objects (Bortolotto 2006, p. 21). As a result of this shift, in the early 2000s UNESCO broke down the category of cultural heritage into two further subcategories: “tangible” heritage, in the form of culturally significant artifacts and architectural sites, and “intangible” heritage, referring to practices, beliefs, and knowledge maintained through oral history (UNESCO 2003).
- 9 UNESCO further breaks down the category of intangible cultural heritage, maintaining two distinct lists: the “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” and the “List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” (UNESCO 2017). The Representative List serves to increase the global visibility of local practices that demonstrate the diversity of human culture. Meanwhile the “List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding” identifies those cultural practices which are in immediate danger of disappearing due to external factors. In practical terms, inclusion in the latter list also includes measures to aid local people in the performance and transmission of their heritage. As many Mongolian traditional practices are closely tied to nomadic pastoralism, which is threatened both by environmental degradation due to climate change and the neoliberalization of Mongolia’s economy, most of the cultural practices I describe in this dissertation are covered under the “List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding”.
- 10 Anthropologists have questioned the validity of separating “natural” from “cultural” phenomena generally (Strathern 1980; Descola 2013). The elements on the natural heritage list have value as heritage by virtue of human interactions with the environment and efforts to imbue it with meaning (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, p. 60; Cleere 2001, pp. 26-27). Tangible heritage consists of objects that have no inherent meaning or cultural value outside of the intangible heritage to which they are connected (Byrne 2009, p. 230). By the same token, the intangible aspects of social lives are inextricably embodied through and constrained by the material reality of heritage bearers’ lives (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, p. 60).
- 11 The interdependence of natural, intangible, and tangible heritage is especially clear in Mongolia, where places like Great Burhan Haldun mountain are added to the “World Natural Heritage List” because of their role in mountain worship, with ovoos listed as the site’s culturally significant architecture (UNESCO 2015a). Ovoos highlight how permeable and interrelated these categories truly are. They are artifacts of tangible heritage that accrue more artifacts in the form of offerings of ritual scarves, ceramic icons, horse skulls and the like. They mark areas of ecological and cultural significance such as sacred mountains and lakes that are home to spirits, where social and environmental prominence are inextricably intertwined.

Heritage and conflict

- 12 There is a large body of scholarship that frames the designation of a place, object, or practice as heritage and the consequent mobilization of that label in terms of conflict. Heritage can be used by the state to ratify national boundaries and diminish affective attachments that challenge its authority, thereby disempowering minority ethnic and political voices and creating a nationalistic sense of xenophobia (Handler 1988; Bulag 1998; Collins 2011). Conversely, heritage also forms the core of counter-hegemonic histories that oppressed people can use to appeal to the international community and subvert elite and nationalistic narratives (Graham 2002; De Cesari 2010; Camal 2016). On a more fundamental level, designation and consumption of heritage is described as a measure to combat the social effects of anthropogenic forces like neoliberalism, as people transform lifeways that are incompatible with global capitalism into consumable aspects of a tourist economy (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Lowenthal 1996).
- 13 Each of these arguments foregrounds human contestations and nationalist politics involved in heritage-making. However, a variety of other entities are also central to discourses on heritage within Mongolia, from the living plants and wildlife of natural heritage zones to the mountains and spirits that populate culturally significant places and practices. Following a recent turn in anthropological literature that considers the sociality of nonhumans (Van Dooren & Bird Rose 2012; Tsing 2013; Posthumus 2018) and their role in negotiations of power (Povinelli 2016; Govindrajana 2018), I take nonhumans as actors in contestations over heritage. I am drawn to wonder what role animals, spirits, and landscape features have in these conflicts.
- 14 This chapter explores three sites of conflict over the practice and administration of heritage in which ovoos play central roles, as their presence and growth create, prevent, or resolve disharmony. Ovoos are non-human agents that further act as catalysts of other non-human agencies, capable of bringing humans, animals, mountains, and spirits into a shared frame in which their worlds are mutually intelligible. By taking a multispecies approach to my examination of oboo practices, I highlight the full range of actors involved in the shaping of heritage, including those nonhumans left ignored by readings of heritage that focus solely on conflict between humans. I argue that the role that ovoos play in these conflicts demonstrates that collaborations with a broad, interconnected field of nonhumans is central to how people mobilize heritage, and will be a vital part of its preservation whether or not this relationship is intentionally fostered at the institutional level.

Tour guide pilgrimages

- 15 Towards the end of fall 2017, I sat down in a coffee shop near my apartment in Ulaanbaatar for a casual interview with Bayar, a storyteller, self-identified shamanist, and ethnographic filmmaker. He was one of many people to tell me some version of the story that started this chapter. He expanded on the legend, adding,
each mountain has different rules for how to interact with it. So people put up ovoos at different parts of the mountain to make those rules known. An oboo teaches you how to interact with the mountain. One might be set up to mean “adults only past

this point”, or another might indicate “men go up this path and women around to that path”. But they always tell you “approach with reverence”.

- 16 As part of his explanation of the history and folklore of ovoos, Bayar mentioned that ovoos worship is central to his spiritual practice. He told me that he worships nature in a way that he referred to as “sort of shamanic”. As he put it: “my grandmother and great-grandfather were shamans, and they taught me all about worshipping nature. They taught me how to respect the land”. He clarified quickly that he did not consider himself a shaman, but that he sees things in a shamanic way based on veneration of the sky, the land, and animals.
- 17 When I asked him to elaborate on what seeing in a shamanic way meant, he responded,
See, shamanism is empirical. You see it, you believe it. Religion requires too much imagination. You white people are very imaginative. When you look up, you look beyond the sky, and imagine a god out there in a whole other world. When I look at the sky, I just see the sky.
- 18 Bayar was proud of his ability to read the land and the behaviors of wild animals, skills he attributed to the knowledge passed down from his shaman grandmother and his subsistence hunter grandfather respectively. However, he made it clear that he cannot commune with those nonhumans directly. He makes his prayers silently to himself as he passes around an ovoos, using it as an intermediary that will pass his prayers on to the sky, the mountain, and the animals.
- 19 At the time of this interview, Bayar had just returned from a summer spent working as a tour guide for westerners looking for a rural adventure. Bayar is a sought-after guide, especially with big game hunters. This is due in part to his skills with English and experience with Americans, but also because of his role as a heritage bearer along with his intimate knowledge of Mongolian landscapes and wild animals.
- 20 Cultural geographer Brian Graham argues that heritage, in both its tangible and intangible forms is the single most important resource for the international tourism industry because tourism operates within a knowledge-based economy (Graham 2002, p. 1007). Bayar’s role as an intangible heritage bearer affords him both social and economy capital within the rapidly expanding tourism industry in Mongolia. Tourism, especially trophy hunting, offers him opportunities to pursue lucrative side-gigs throughout the summer. However, he reported ambivalent feelings about this line of work. “On the one hand”, he told me, “it is pretty ridiculous that people come to Mongolia just to kill a ram”. Bayar mentioned that some hunters from the United States and Europe even spend tens of thousands of dollars on permits to try to shoot endangered endemic Mongolian animals. “They don’t even pay by the animal, just by the bullet. One shot, if they miss it’s over”².
- 21 UNESCO identifies the presence of threatened or endangered animals as a major element of natural heritage (UNESCO 1976). If endangered game animals like the argali ram (*argal*) constitute a fundamental resource for Mongolia’s natural heritage areas, then international trophy hunting is a form of natural heritage consumption. This corner of the heritage industry is especially troubling for Bayar, having been raised in a subsistence hunting family whose spiritual practice involves veneration for sacred game. Still, he decided that if he is part of the hunt, he can keep the damage the hunters make to the environment and to the wild flocks to a minimum. As he put it, “I lead the hunters to old or sick animals, never to mothers. And I make the necessary prayers”.

- 22 Bayar explained that he travels around the country as a tour and hunting guide to natural sacred spaces and that he uses the opportunity to tend to them as a form of spiritual work. As Bayar described, both international and domestic tourism put physical and spiritual burdens on the landscape. He said that foreign trophy hunters cause obvious problem for wild animals, disrupting the social structures of their flocks by carelessly targeting according to size and accessibility rather than hunting in an informed, ecologically beneficial manner. He pointed out that even supposedly nonviolent eco-tourism disturbs wild animals and plant life, as people trample wild forage and leave plastic litter behind.
- 23 Bayar reported feeling like he is continually faced with the question of how to address those damages and furthermore mitigate the spiritual impact of his role in it. He came to the conclusion that he could mitigate the physical and spiritual damage to wild flocks by directing hunters to appropriate game and making his prayers via local ovoos. As he described them, his prayers often involve cleaning away litter from on or around the ovoo as well. For Bayar, the act of cleaning the area around an ovoo has a spiritual purpose similar to leaving offerings.
- 24 The spiritual practices Bayar described involved some socially risky behaviors. “Not everyone agrees on my definition of litter”, he explained. Some of the things he clears away are widely accepted to be litter, things like cigarette butts or plastic water bottles. However, he also clears the food offerings off of ovoos and cuts the ritual scarves from saplings to allow them freedom to grow. I asked if the spirits of the land might be offended by his removal of their offerings. He told me that practicing his religion means he must keep the ovoos and the ecosystem healthy.
- 25 “The food draws rodents”, Bayar explained, “who live inside the ovoos, and infest it with their nests”. The rodents would then take these offerings as their own, gnawing away at the innards of the ovoos. He described in great detail how rodents knock over the carefully placed ceramic offerings and disperse piles of burning incense with their crawling bodies. These rodents have their own relationships with the ovoos in which they dwell. It protects them and provides them with food and shelter. However, their patronage of the ovoos is at odds with Bayar’s, undermining its structural integrity and bodily purity.
- 26 Even though he means well, Bayar admitted that this practice occasionally gets him in trouble with local people. On his most recent trip through the Hangai Mountains his ovoo maintenance activities drew the ire of a local herder, who caught Bayar removing offerings. “I was throwing away rice and candy that had been left on the ovoo and I heard this guy shouting at me!”. He laughed as he told this story of how he found himself involved in a three-way struggle between himself, the herder, and a colony of mice. Bayar and this herder, whose name he never mentioned, argued over this issue for some time. Bayar acted out the confrontation, “the herder said, ‘what are you doing with my offerings? Don’t you respect the ovoo?’ I told him, I respect the ovoo, that’s why I’m doing this!”. As he told the story, he, became louder, his gestures more animated, drawing attention from the other coffee shop patrons. He smiled and sheepishly added, “see? Troublemaker”.
- 27 Though the argument started contentiously, their shared goal of creating and maintaining a healthy spiritual landscape through proper care of its ovoos allowed for them to end the conversation amicably. Bayar continued his story quietly,

I let him explain his viewpoint to me, and then I explained to him how I see the world. I told the guy that we have to adapt our thinking because the environment is being destroyed too fast these days and we have to be really careful with how we manage these sacred landscapes.

- 28 In the end they compromised. The herder conceded that Bayar might have some insight from his experiences in a wide variety of sacred spaces, while Bayar admitted that he should show more humility toward local custodians of the land. The herder agreed to let Bayar finish clearing off the ovoo so long as he made an offering of his own, in his own way. He set up a wooden post to adorn with the ritual scarves he had cut from nearby saplings. The foreign tourists that Bayar was working for at the time sat awkwardly in the van, with no knowledge of the Mongolian language and thus, not privy to the conversation.
- 29 Working as a tour guide presented Bayar with an internal conundrum. He balanced his displeasure at participating in a tourism industry that exploits the landscapes he holds sacred against the idea that this line of work might be the best opportunity to mitigate the spiritual and ecological damage that industry creates. He resolved this dilemma through his maintenance of the ovoos he finds around tourist destinations. Ovoos offer him an opportunity for some spiritual and cultural resiliency within the broader apparatus of tourism that heritage creates. However, his strategies for tending them have brought him into external conflicts with local people and animals.

Music for the mountain

- 30 The designation of ovoos as Mongolian cultural heritage opens local people's interactions up to critical consumption by outsiders, particularly Western cultural tourists. In this section, I present cases where Mongolian artists use traditional music as a spiritual practice dedicated to ovoos. I further examine how the designation of ovoos as heritage leads to pushback on Mongolian musicians' personal religious practices from Western observers.
- 31 I spent most of winter 2017 conducting interviews with horse-fiddle performers, singers, and traditional music instructors in Ulaanbaatar on the uses of heritage music. For my first interview of the season, I started with Tüvshee, a fiddler specializing in "long-song" (*urtyn duu*). Based on a body of literature that takes heritage as the transformation of pre-modern lifeways into commodifiable goods (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Lowenthal 1996), my interview questions focused on the economic use of intangible cultural heritage.
- 32 Early in the interview after a few of these economically-focused questions, Tüvshee stopped me, saying "you cannot really make a living selling traditional music, not in Ulaanbaatar". He crossed his arms over his chest and continued, "I mean think about it, in Mongolia we only have a population of three million people. Even if every person in the country was my fan I would have a hard time making ends meet just selling albums". In fact, though he is a professional horse-fiddle performer, composer, and professor, his main source of income is an electronics business which he runs on the side. Many of the traditional musicians and artists I interviewed that winter were in a similar situation, balancing an unstable and underpaying career in the arts with other business pursuits that offer more financial security.

- 33 Tüvshee finished his explanation of the grim realities of the Mongolian traditional music industry with this concession, “playing the fiddle does help me make money though, in a way”. When he has a financial concern, he said that he bundles up his horse-fiddle, hikes up to one of the sacred mountains that rings the city, and plays long-song to the *ovoos* there as a way of asking the tutelary spirits of the mountain (*savdag*) and of the rivers (*lus*) to help him in business.
- 34 Ulaanbaatar sits in a bowl formed by four holy mountains: Bogd Han, Chingeltei Hairhan, Bayanzürh, and Songino Hairhan. Most prominent among them is Bogd Han, which sits at the south end of town. It is one of those under-represented places in the history of natural heritage management, established by the Qing emperor as a protected natural area in 1778 (Atwood 2004, p. 166; UNESCO 2015b) predating the 1872 formation of Yellowstone Park by nearly a century. Protection for wild game and prohibition on logging have been major parts of natural preservation laws of the site since the 18th century (Atwood 2004, p. 166).
- 35 In addition to being a national park, Bogd Han, along with the other three mountains that ring the city, is a major part of the spiritual character of Ulaanbaatar. As with other natural heritage areas throughout Mongolia, communities of animals make up the spiritual landscape of Ulaanbaatar’s holy mountains. Bogd Han in particular is known for its elk, which wander into the city on occasion.

Figure 1. View of Ulaanbaatar from Zaisan Monument, the entry point to Bogd Han, July 2015

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- 36 Tüvshee broke down the way he prays to these mountains for me, explaining that the wood and rosin that go into the performance of the fiddle create a sympathetic relationship between the music of the fiddle and the spirits of landscape. The horsehair from the instrument’s strings bring the animals who live on the mountain into this

relationship as well. He said that he taps into that connection to communicate his needs and his feelings to the otherwise unreachable mountain. In this ritual, the horse-fiddle and ovoo are his interpreters. “This is the primary way I practice my religion”, he explained.

- 37 Unlike Bayar, Tüvshee did not describe himself as shamanic, nor did he describe himself as worshipping nature. He is a devout, practicing Buddhist. I bring this fact up only to highlight that ovoo practices are not necessarily tied to one religion or philosophy in the Mongolian context. Rather ovoo worship is tied to a discrete set of social relationships between particular people, mountains, spirits, and animals.
- 38 Using musical performance as a form of worship or veneration of mountains and water features is a widely documented as a part of rural spirituality in Mongolia (Pegg 2001; Post 2007), as well as throughout nomadic Inner Asia (Levin & Süzükei 2006). Bogd Han mountain is one of the few sacred natural spaces in Mongolia to have a centuries-long history as a fixture of a major city, seeing the rise of Hūree and its transformation into Ulaanbaatar (Atwood 2004, p. 565). Tüvshee’s interaction with Bogd Han as a protector takes a distinctly urban form. In addition to asking for financial stability, he told me that he conducts this ritual at the beginning of winter to protect him from air pollution related illness and car accidents, two major physical dangers of Ulaanbaatar life.
- 39 Tüvshee’s comments about the close connection between long-song, ovoo, and urban life stuck with me throughout the rest of that winter. A few weeks later, over coffee with a group of friends I asked Zulaa, a professional long-song singer, what she thought about the relationship between music and Ulaanbaatar’s sacred mountains. She told me she goes up Bogd Han mountain once a week in the winter. Hiking is important for her lungs and voice, especially during this season when air pollution is at its worst. Born and raised in Ulaanbaatar, she finds the clear air of Bogd Han a relief.
- 40 Though Zulaa usually likes the company of the hiking groups, on the days leading up to a major performance she said that she goes up alone. She has a ritual for those occasions, in which she lugs a massive backpack up the mountain trail. Upon reaching a flat peak ringed by ovoos of different sizes and ages she stops and sets down her pack. Carefully, meaningfully, she removes a bundle, which she unrolls into a performance costume (*deel*) and set of horn-style hair plaits. She sings to the Bogd Han in full performance dress, to ask the mountain to help her in her upcoming performances and send some financial opportunities her way. With New Year’s celebrations and the threat of family hospital bills, winter is always a difficult time of year financially for Ulaanbaatarites.
- 41 Zulaa makes her living as a professional singer, and is a card-carrying member of the Mongolian National Long-Song Association, but at the time of this conversation she did not have a consistent appointment in an orchestra or ensemble. She mentioned that she had a featured performance soon. She would visit Bogd Han soon and perform the songs she was planning to sing for it, to ask for her concert to go well and lead to more consistent employment, or even to a record deal.
- 42 As she recounted this story, one of our mutual friends was steaming. Carl, a European expatriate, long-term Ulaanbaatar resident, and self-styled expert on Mongolian traditional music reacted to Zulaa’s story hotly. Rolling his eyes, he berated her, “asking for money? This is a perversion of the traditional way”. Carl has positioned Zulaa within what Trouillot refers to as the “Savage slot”, the ever-shifting category of

non-Western people which the Western capitalist imagination self-defines against (2002). In Carl's imaginary, Zulaa as an Asian traditional musician, should occupy a utopia that is entirely outside of capitalism and modernity.

- 43 Both long-song and ritual practices of worship at ovoo are part of Mongolia's internationally recognized intangible cultural heritage. Zulaa's appeal to ovoids and private mobilization of intangible cultural heritage practices to meet financial needs offended Carl's sensibilities. Based on conventional western ideas about authenticity in intangible heritage, he argued that ovoids should not be used with material ends in mind. In response to Carl's outburst Zulaa put up her hands. She pointed out that, though tradition is fine, "no one can survive trying to live an ancient life in the modern day".
- 44 As a singer and instrumentalist respectively, Zulaa and Tüvshee use long-song to appeal to mountains, via their ovoids. Mountains then intervene on their behalf, helping them navigate the inherently cosmopolitan calamities of Ulaanbaatar life, from financial insecurity to increasingly severe climate disasters and their consequent health crises. In this ritual, the ovoids act as interpreters of agency as they carry Tüvshee and Zulaa's offerings to the mountain and direct the mountain's power back in turn.
- 45 Though both Zulaa and Tüvshee were very open about the fact that they perform music at ovoids as a way of venerating local mountains, they kept many details about these performances private. They declined to specify what songs they chose or how they chose them and what aesthetic choices informed their performances. In both cases the idea of me coming along for one of these performances was out of the question. Though neither said as much, I inferred that they were only comfortable with opening some aspects of ovoo worship to outside scrutiny. Their usage of a heritage music and mountain-worshipping rituals, both of which have been designated intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, to resolve distinctly modern, urban issues leads to a secondary conflict. The inscription of these concepts as heritage creates a cosmopolitan consumer base, who bring with them western notions of what is an appropriate approach to traditional spiritual practices. The ovoo for better or worse, with its premodern history and ancient appearance, was the centerpiece on Carl's reprobation of Zulaa. It was the fulcrum around which broader conflicts of colonialism, race, and gender played out between friends at a coffee shop downtown.

Monastery ruins

- 46 At the end of spring, I joined up with Bayar again. The tourist season was about to pick back up, so he wanted to revisit some spots in the Gobi province of Dundgov', monasteries mostly, to scope them out for future tours. I went with him, taking this as an opportunity to see the back-end of the tourism industry.
- 47 We started our journey in the typical way for those leaving Ulaanbaatar and heading into the country: with an offering to a "drivers' ovoo" (*zhooloochny ovoo*). Bayar took his time clearing off food and drink offerings. He showed me a bottle of vodka that he had pulled off the ovoo before tossing it in the trash can. Grimacing, he shook his head and we took to the road.
- 48 Of the monasteries we visited throughout the Gobi, one stood out in particular for the "more-than-human network" (Tsing 2013) it brought together. Sum Höh Bürd is both

the ruin of an ancient monastery and an oasis that gives migrating birds a place to rest. The small wetland surrounding Höh Börd was breathtaking, cut as a band of greenish-blue water and tall waving yellow reeds against the red and brown backdrop of the semi-arid steppe.

- 49 As the length and severity of droughts in the region become worse in response to climate change, water features like this one are becoming more vital to the birds who migrate through. Not far away in this same province I had seen a lake used by herders to water their livestock dry up each year since I started working in the region in 2010. By 2015 it had disappeared completely, driving herders away from that pasture. Approaching Höh Börd, both Bayar and I were shocked to see flocks of ducks and seagulls. Just under the shadow of the nearby owoos, a nesting pair of demoiselle cranes pranced in the shallow, slowly-coursing water.

Figure 2. Sum Höh Börd and its surrounding wetland, May 2018

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- 50 Before entering the monastery, we visited the owoo on the overlooking hill. From this vantage point, we could clearly see ruins poking up from behind the reeds. Bayar directed my attention to a single swan sitting regally among the rushes in the heart of the marsh, flanked by a dozen seagulls, a few ducks, and two cranes. He told me the swan is a sign that the owoos around the wetlands are doing good work, indicating that some of their duties are to maintain the health of the wetland enough that birds can continue to use it as a place to rest.
- 51 The area around the monastery was fenced off, having been renovated by the Mongolian government in 2016. The gate was flanked by two buildings: a park ranger station on one side and the central office for a tourist camp on the other. The presence of these stations highlighted the multiplicity of ways that “heritage” is consumed at places like Sum Höh Börd. The ranger station indicates the wetland surrounding the ruins as a protected natural zone. Meanwhile the tourist camp, with yurts for rent set

up within the fenced off area, uses the ruins' status as an artifact of Mongolia's tangible cultural heritage as a source of value for the domestic tourism industry.

- 52 Both buildings were empty, and the gate was open hanging open, so we let ourselves in. We followed a stone path that winds around the marsh to the ruins. At the end of the path, a complex of crumbled rooms faced a stage, purportedly first constructed by the Buddhist luminary, Fifth Noyon Hutagt Dulduityn Danzanravzhaa (1803-1856) for performances of his plays. Just past the stage there was another new structure, a museum dedicated to the history of the monastery. Like the ranger station and tourist camp, this museum was empty. Looking through the windows we noticed that it had not yet been filled with exhibits.
- 53 There was very little of the monastery itself left standing. What was once a cohesive structure was now a maze of freestanding walls and piles of stones. The roofs of the structure had all fallen in. Even the walls that were still standing sported massive holes. Bayar seemed off-put. Gazing through one of these holes he remarked that the walls looked like they had been blown apart by dynamite.
- 54 Kestrels soared about the ruins using those holes as resting spots. They treated the crumbling, pitted walls as kestrels in other parts of the Gobi treat natural cliffs. I stood on the stage, rebuilt as part of the Mongolian government's 2016 rehabilitation effort, and tried to imagine what it would have been like to perform here when the monastery was still active. Behind me I heard Bayar say, "this is a place of tragedy". When I turned to ask him what he meant, he pointed out an ovoo that had been constructed bearing fresh silk scarf offerings deep in a collapsed room.
- 55 The ruins are populated by a handful of small ovoos like this one. Several more dot the ridgeline. Just outside the front gate there is a large ovoo in the state-constructed style with wooden supports and an even, geometric shape presumably built-up when the site was rehabilitated as an ecologically protected area.
- 56 Bayar explained that ovoos pop up around abandoned or ruined monasteries "like mushrooms after the rains". Quietly, he added that some people build them and worship at them to assuage the spirits of monks who were killed during the Stalinist purge during the late 1930s. Even though this monastery was ancient and appeared to have fallen out of use before the socialist era, it bore markers of that period's state violence.
- 57 As we retraced our steps back out of the ruins, Bayar asked if I believe in ghosts. Nodding back over the water to the amphitheater he continued, "people say the ghosts of monks get trapped in these monasteries. Some people even come out to places like this at night looking for lights". As we departed a group of people, well dressed in the traditional style, had found a way into the ruins through the back and were carefully adorning its ovoos with ritual scarves. Bayar insisted that we pay respects to that large, seemingly state-constructed ovoo before we leave, to help maintain the wetland's ecosystem.
- 58 At this monastery natural heritage, cultural heritage, and the "negative heritage" of commemorated violence intersect (Meskell 2002). The heritage of this site operates on a nonlinear moral temporality. The ovoos here stand as bulwarks against a future which promises desertification and climate change on behalf of a wetland and the birds who rely on it. The very same ovoos work as reminders of the violence of Soviet pseudo-colonialism and Stalinist purges and as offerings to the spirits of the dead at a

monastery that likely fell to ruin long before the socialist period began. The ovoos operate as witnesses to the ghosts of monks that are said to haunt the monastery and play out the deaths of other monks who would be killed centuries after them on a stage for an audience of ghost-hunting humans and migrating birds.

Conclusion

- 59 To return to the legend at the start of this article, it is notable that mountain-spirits and people in the story occupy the same environment but are unable to understand each another without the intervention of ovoos. Their worlds overlap just enough to create discord. In each of the above examples, ovoos act as brokers for agency, connecting the wills and needs of animals, mountains, and ghosts with humans and broader structures of transnational consumption. To frame heritage as either a quest for state hegemony or a form of political subversion for oppressed groups misses the non-human actors engaging with, constituting, and shaping heritage sites and practices.
- 60 Bayar, Zulaa, and Tüvshee engaged in what they describe as mutual preservation with ovoos and the multispecies networks that those ovoos represent. In their own ways they each tied their spiritual, financial, and physical health to the health of these ovoos. They have all been faced with difficult situations arising from transnational structures, and they work through ovoos to find solutions that mobilize a more-than-human web of social relations.
- 61 However, in resolving their first conflict they are invariably led to a second. Bayar's solution to the environmental and spiritual degradation that come with tourism puts him into conflict with local people and animals in the areas he tries to restore. Tüvshee and Zulaa's solution to concerns of health and financial stability is subject to the ire of western consumers, who use the inscription of spiritual practices and spaces as internationally valuable heritage to stake claims on the musicians' right to mobilize their own cultural resources. As the first pass around the ovoos is never enough to complete a ritual, these three continue to work through ovoos to find further solutions to these conflicts. With each pass, another stone is added, creating artifacts that grow and spread in number in commemoration of these struggles.

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NOTES

1. “Wrathful” (*hilegneh*). Occasionally “hard” (*hatuu*) or “fierce” (*dogshin*).
2. In their 2019 article on Donald Trump Jr’s trophy hunting scandal, Anand Tumurtogoo and Jake Pearson estimate that western trophy hunters spend \$20 000-50 000 apiece on permits to go on hunting tours in Mongolia, targeting endangered wild game like argali rams.

ABSTRACTS

As environmentally-sourced artifacts that grow in size with each interaction with humans, ovoos in Mongolia delineate both space and time in ecologically and politically charged ways. Their presence and power as spiritual beings and historical markers is derived from and enacted upon the ecological and social landscapes which they oversee. This paper explores how ovoos instigate, mediate, and commemorate conflict in ways that entangle environmental and cultural heritage. Drawing on the experiences of three heritage bearers who interact with ovoos as part of their livelihood, I argue that ovoos allow for people to access more-than-human networks as part of their heritage preservation.

En tant qu’artéfacts d’origine environnementale dont la taille croît à chaque interaction avec les humains, les ovoos, en Mongolie, délimitent l’espace et le temps de manière écologiquement et politiquement chargée. Leur présence et leur pouvoir en tant qu’êtres spirituels et marqueurs historiques sont dérivés des paysages écologiques et sociaux qu’ils supervisent. Cet article explore comment les ovoos suscitent, arbitrent et commémorent les conflits mêlant patrimoines environnemental et culturel. Sur la base des expériences de trois porteurs de patrimoine qui interagissent avec les ovoos dans leur vie quotidienne, je soutiens que les ovoos leur permettent d’accéder à des réseaux dépassant l’humain dans leur préservation du patrimoine.

INDEX

Keywords: Mongolia, anthropology, religion, landscape, heritage, posthumanism, music, ritual, spirits, ovoo, mountain

Mots-clés: Mongolie, anthropologie, religion, paysage, patrimoine, posthumanisme, musique, rituel, esprits, ovoo, montagne

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