

Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines

52 | 2021

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

The middle of the story. Owoos and the ecological imagination in Mongolian conservation

*Le milieu de l'histoire. Owoo et imagination écologique dans la protection de
l'environnement en Mongolie*

Rebecca Watters



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/emscat/5194>

DOI: 10.4000/emscat.5194

ISSN: 2101-0013

Publisher

Société des études mongoles et sibériennes

Electronic reference

Rebecca Watters, "The middle of the story. Owoos and the ecological imagination in Mongolian conservation", *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 52 | 2021, Online since 23 December 2021, connection on 09 June 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/5194> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.5194>

This text was automatically generated on June 9, 2024.

The text and other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

The middle of the story. Ovoos and the ecological imagination in Mongolian conservation

Le milieu de l'histoire. Ovoo et imagination écologique dans la protection de l'environnement en Mongolie

Rebecca Watters

Introduction

- 1 Conservation as an international endeavor has been heavily critiqued as being culturally and epistemologically imperialistic, particularly with reference to the formation of protected areas (West *et al.* 2006). Often, however, such critiques ignore the existence of local ethics of and efforts towards conservation. In Mongolia, a strong conservation ethic predates contact with Western¹ conservation efforts (Humphrey *et al.* 1993). This Mongolian conservation ethic has motivated the formation of protected areas, both traditional and modern (Reading 2006), and has the potential to serve as the foundation for conservation efforts that incorporate both Mongolian traditional ecological knowledge and Western science. In particular, *ovoo* sites have proven to be productive spaces of dialogue and integration of different understandings of conservation in the author's twenty years of working on wildlife research in Mongolia.
- 2 This paper briefly explores foundational understandings of "nature" in Mongolian and Western conservation contexts, and then examines *ovoo* practices at two locations. The first is Harhorin in Övörhangai Province in central Mongolia, the site of the ancient Mongol imperial capital (Karakorum). Harhorin was a locus of encounters with foreign influences during the 13th and 14th centuries. It is also the site of the country's oldest extant Buddhist monastery, Erdene Zuu, built in the late 16th century, and is one of the major tourism sites for travelers to Mongolia since the end of the socialist era. It

embodies the essence of the cosmopolitan steppe, a place open to and embracing of diverse influences. The second site is the Darhad Valley in northern Mongolia, a remote region where communities have widely rejected Buddhism and embraced shamanism. This resource-rich region has been important at various times as a source of minerals and forest products (Pedersen 2011) and was the location of outposts of the Manchu Qing empire (1644-1911), but has never served as the sort of cultural crossroads and center of governance that Harhorin has. Since the end of the socialist era, gold and jade rushes, the formation of national protected areas, and the arrival of Western conservation projects have brought further entanglements with “outsider” influence to the Darhad. Ovoos in both locations have served as sites of discussion, instruction, and ultimately incorporation into appropriate social relationships with the landscape. It is the social nature of these relationships that illuminates both the differences between Western and Mongolian conservation approaches, and also the potential for a meeting ground between different epistemological and ontological assumptions in the generation of conservation knowledge and practice.

Nature and *baigal'*

- 3 Ovoos practices in Mongolia have been explored in numerous publications, most of which focus on the political significance of highly organized community rituals (see for example Sneath 2010), the different aspects and gradations of fortune in Mongolia (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012), and/or on how ovoos intersect with shamanism and Buddhism (Pedersen 2011). Interactions with ovoos, however, may also be individualistic and personal, and may encompass narratives about relationships with the landscape and other features of the environment. As Lindskog (2016, p 2) points out, in conducting such personal rituals at an ovoos, “the *doing* of ritual is privileged over the *understanding* of ritual”. Lindskog argues that this characteristic highlights the essentially social features of these interactions, which are not about maintaining a prescribed set of practices or even beliefs, but rather focus on the interaction between the human individual and the non-human landscape entity. In this context, particularly for conservation practitioners, ovoos become focal points for understanding human-nature relationships.
- 4 Nature, of course, is a concept that requires further elucidation in the context of Mongolian and English-speaking encounters. The Mongolian word *baigal'*, which is commonly translated into English as “nature”, is related to the verb *baih*, “to be”. *Baigal'* – roughly, “everything that is” – is, in many respects, broader and more encompassing than the English word “nature”, which has narrowed to include only things that exist independent of human artifice or interference. By contrast, humans (and livestock) are seen as “natural” in Mongolia, as evidenced by statements such as “humans are nature’s animals” and “argali [*Ovis ammon*] and ibex [*Capra siberica*] are the livestock of the mountain *ezed* [owners of the land, sing. *ezen*]” (Batbold, personal friend, personal communication 2014). The tension between humans and nature, the nature/culture divide that underpins the Western conservation narrative, is largely absent in Mongolia. Anthropology as an academic field has started to question this divide (see, for example, Humphrey 1995), but Western conservation practitioners still primarily operate in the positivist tradition and perceive nature as something outside of and essentially separate from humans.

- 5 This difference in definition creates a foundational misunderstanding between Mongolian and Western conservationists. Western conservation, relying on a narrative of opposition between people and nature, posits separation of humans and the environment, and a return of natural systems to a state of primordial wildness, as the main solution to conservation problems. In Mongolia, by contrast, environmental problems are seen as the result of being in a bad state of relationship with the environment and its constituent entities, such as the *ezed* that are tied to specific mountains, rivers, or other natural features. Improving one's relationship with the landscape is frequently the best option for remedying an environmental problem. In some cases this may even involve intensifying the relationship in ways that Western conservation would view as destructive, as when, for example, humans must hunt depredating wolves in order to rebalance relationships with the mountains (Charlier 2015). For many Mongolians, severing the nature-human relationship is seen as a source of disharmony and an abandonment of obligation, rather than a potential solution to any environmental issue. Environmental values are held more strongly by rural Mongolians than urban Mongolians (Kaczensky 2007), and most Mongolians attribute this division to the fact that urban Mongolians no longer make a living off the land and have essentially abandoned their connection to the landscape. This scenario contrasts strongly with the Western environmentalist assumption that living on the land is inherently destructive, and that wealthy professional urban and suburban constituents form the best base for environmental advocacy because they no longer directly depend on exploitation of resources such as wildlife for survival or entertainment.
- 6 Likewise alien in Mongolia but rampant in Western conservation dialogue is a hierarchical caretaking assumption that places humans outside of, above, and in control of the environment. This hierarchical assumption is found among diverse Western conservation proponents, from those advocating for the human-environment connection that comes through so-called working landscapes – where people exploiting resources see themselves as stewards and improvers of the environment – to environmental advocates who advocate for “taking care of the planet” through protective environmental policies. In these narratives, humans always have greater power, either as extractors of value from the landscape, as benevolent guardians of environmental integrity, or both. Mongolian relationships with the natural world, on the other hand, are generally seen as reciprocal (Lindskog 2016), with mutual exchange, mutual responsibility, and mutual possibility of both depredation and benefit. Humans are embedded within the landscape and ecosystem and are engaged in a constant set of negotiations that include the possibility of obtaining, at least momentarily, some degree of mastery and power for their own benefit, but the natural world ultimately has a greater store of power.
- 7 Personal *ovoos* practices are often expressions of a desire to enhance and intensify relationships with the landscape and environment, in ways that reflect both a desire for personal benefit, and also a desire to return something to the landscape – whether the skull of a prized horse, an offering of food, or simply admiration for a beautiful location. It is the maintenance of the relationship, however, that seems to be the ultimate objective, and expanding this set of relationships to include new individuals, including outsiders engaged in conservation work, may allow for better outcomes in the conservation field in Mongolia.

Hangai Owoo

- 8 In 2000, Hangai Owoo, at the top of a peak overlooking the town of Harhorin (Övörhangai Province) and the place where the Orhon River spills from the Hangai Mountains onto the steppe, was a conical structure of poles erected above a circular stone platform and adorned with ritual scarves (Mo. *hadag*) and wind-horse-printed prayer flags. Smaller satellite piles of stone radiated from that central structure. Prayer flags stretched from the center pile to these smaller piles, where small offerings were interspersed with the rocks. Inside the structure of the owoo, an altar held offerings of tea and incense, and a few butter lamps. The skulls of ibex and argali and the pelts of lynx and wolves dangled from the poles amid a thicket of ritual scarves. Behind the ritual scarves on the east side of the owoo, the skin from the head of a snow leopard hung like a mask.
- 9 The first time I visited the owoo, in fall of 2000, as a newly-arrived Peace Corps volunteer, I was ostensibly having a horseback riding lesson, but since my Mongolian instructor, an older local man, had learned to ride as a toddler, he didn't have much systematic direction to impart, aside from "hold on". We meandered up into the mountains and arrived at the owoo. He hopped off his horse and started to perform circumambulation. During my Peace Corps training, I'd been told that women were not supposed to be at these high mountain owoo sites, so I asked if I could join him, and whether it was okay that I was there. My Mongolian at that point was still rudimentary, but I am sure I conveyed my meaning. He looked at me as if astonished by the question, and said, "It's okay!" (Mo. *Zügeer, zügeer!*). Aside from that exchange, I no longer remember the particulars of the conversation, but his attitude was clear: he was happy to show me the owoo, he had brought me up there for that reason, and he didn't have a problem with women being there. He picked up three stones, made sure I did the same, and together we paid our respects.

Figure 1. Hangai Ovoo, Harhorin, Ovorhangai, 2010



© Rebecca Watters

- 10 This visit was the start of a long relationship with Hangai Ovoo, one which entailed weekly visits over the course of the next two years. Not knowing exactly what an *ovoo* was, but enchanted by the solitude, the views, and a sense of unseen presences imparted partly by the offerings (made by what hand? And when? I never saw anyone up there) and partly by the eerie, watchful skulls, I walked the 3 km up the mountain from town in all seasons and all weather. I started to ask my new Mongolian friends questions: What exactly were people worshipping when they went to the *ovoo*? Was it a kind of nature worship? What were the spirits I had heard about, and were they really “spirits” as we in the Western world seem to conceptualize such entities? How did these *ovoo* practices relate to Buddhism?
- 11 I had not come to Mongolia as an anthropologist, although I had just finished an undergraduate degree in anthropology. I was there as a Peace Corps² environmental volunteer, assigned to teach ecology to students and to train biology teachers in ecological science. The question of environmental protection was therefore also on my mind when I was first introduced to Hangai Ovoo. Among the very first conversations I had when I arrived in Harhorin were two that touched on my role as a foreign ecologist and teacher. In the first instance, my counterpart, a teacher in her forties, challenged my presence, asking why I had come to Mongolia to teach about environmentalism when Mongolians had a longer tradition of environmental protection than Americans did. The second was a discussion with three of the teachers from my school in which they clearly laid out the rules concerning how I was and was not to interact with the Orhon River and the mountains: no fishing, because the fish were animals sacred to the river protectors (*Mo. lusyn am'tan*), and killing them would anger the water protectors (*Mo. lus*). No urine or milk or blood in the river. No behaving in ways that would disrespect the mountains. Their anxiety about how I might transgress these boundaries indicated their priorities in fitting me into their community for the coming two years.

Ensuring my ability to be appropriately social with the landscape was as basic as ascertaining that I knew how to be social with people in a yurt (Mo. *ger*).

- 12 One of my key questions, then, was whether *ovoos*, as places where people apparently left the domestic sphere to connect with “nature”, were a potential focal point for conservation actions. In particular, were they places where we could hold useful conversations about the intersections of Mongolia’s long history of what might be loosely termed traditional environmental protection practices, as described by the teacher who questioned me about my presence in Mongolia – reverence for landscape and wildlife, forbidding of hunting during certain seasons, worship and formal legal protection of particular mountains, stories that teach about ethical relationships between human and nature – with what might be termed foreign, modern, scientific, democratic, and/or capitalist modes of environmental protection?
- 13 Soon most of the people in town knew that I regularly went up to the *ovoo*. People were interested in my interest, and gave varying explanations about what an *ovoo* was. It was a place for ceremonies of fortune. It was a place where men went to ask for success in hunting as they went into the mountains; the skulls and the pelts were there as a thank you for that success, and as an offering for future success. During the Lunar New Year (Tsagaan Sar), friends who knew of my *ovoo* interest would point out the similarities between *ovoos* and the mountainous arrangements of biscuits (Mo. *yeven*) and dried cheese (Mo. *aaruu*) that stood at the center of the Lunar New Year celebrations. Erdene Zuu Monastery, the oldest Buddhist monastery in Mongolia and the centerpiece of Harhorin’s religious life and its tourism industry, held an annual ceremony in which town residents carried volumes of the Buddhist sacred scriptures (Mo. *Kanjuur*; Tib. *bKa’ gyur*) around the monastery. My closest friend, Oyuna, an English teacher then in her late twenties, pointed out that the procession mirrored the circumambulation of an *ovoo*, with a similar outcome: the achievement of good fortune (Mo. *buyan hishig*) for the coming year.
- 14 The most well-known of the local shamans, meanwhile, said that *ovoos* were places where people connected with the power of the natural world. During an initial conversation with him in October of 2000, he talked for a long time, unfortunately before my Mongolian was good enough to follow everything he said, about places of power on the landscape, how geography affected the human mind, and how *ovoos* were focal places for this connection and power.
- 15 Stories of connections between people, *ovoos* and what I thought of as nature abounded, but a clear and concise explanation of what an *ovoo* was, what people did there, what entities they engaged with, and how it reflected human-nature relationships, failed to emerge by the time I finished my Peace Corps service in 2002.
- 16 By 2009, when I returned to Harhorin after a seven-year absence to begin work on a wolverine (*Gulo gulo*; Mo. *nohoi zeeh*) research project, the skulls and pelts were gone from the *ovoo*, as were most of the hundreds of ritual scarves that had formerly hung from the inside of the wooden structure. Otherwise, it seemed unchanged, but the absence of the wildlife parts seemed significant.
- 17 The monks from Erdene Zuu, meanwhile, had built an Ecology Temple (Mo. *Ekologiin hiid*)³ on a small ridge on the outskirts of town, across the river from and facing the valley that led up to Hangai *Ovoo*. This temple was dedicated to Buddhist environmental protection practices, with a main temple space hung with *thangkas* of

various *lus savdag* (a Buddhist term for the landscape protectors colloquially referred to as *ezed*) and fierce protectors of the dharma. Two small classrooms were covered in educational posters of wildlife, plants, food webs, the water cycle, and other ecological concepts. A small *ovoo* stood behind the temple, along with a much older Bronze Age stone monument (Mo. *hirigsüür*) and a row of prayer wheels. The space was used for both the monastery school and for local schools' ecology clubs, and combined Buddhist teachings with Western scientific instruction. The temple was also used for more conventional Buddhist practices; I spent an evening making butter lamps with Oyuna and her family after her mother passed away, and we took them the next day to offer at the Ecology Temple. The temple functioned across three realms: general Buddhist rites, specific Buddhist land protection practices, and scientific education.

Figure 2. Ecology Temple (Mo. *Lusyn hiid*) affiliated with Erdene Zuu Monastery, Harhorin, Ovorhangai, 2010



© Rebecca Watters

- 18 Several years later, in 2011, on another trip up to Hangai Ovoo, I encountered a swastika (*has*)-shaped rock monument, in the middle of which was a pole bearing the black horsetail battle standard of Chinggis Khan. Someone had tied a wolverine pelt around the middle of this pole. At the base of the monument were several pieces of metal painted with admonishments not to enter the Hangai Nuruu National Park with bad intentions, lest the “fierce” (Mo. *dogshin*) *ezed* and protectors of the region strike the individuals down. *Dogshin*, maybe coincidentally, is one of the most frequent words that people use, in general conversation and in formal interviews, to describe the character of the wolverine, along with other species deemed fierce, elusive, or rare and self-sufficient. In Harhorin and other Mongolian places with strong Buddhist traditions, this word is frequently applied to the fierce manifestations of bodhisattvas, such as Mahākāla or Vajrayoginī. Humphrey and Ujeed elaborate upon the ways in which worship of these fierce deities is central to certain Mongolian Buddhist traditions, where their ferociousness and propensity for destruction is harnessed for

“counteracting and destroying not only external impediments but also the *inner* defilements of the person” (2013, p. 56).

Figure 3. A black horsetail battle standard of Chinggis Khan in the middle of a swastika-shaped stone monument, with a wolverine pelt tied to the pole, Harhorin, Ovorhangai, July 2011



© Rebecca Watters

- 19 The use of the wolverine pelt seemed to draw a direct line among mountain *ezed* characterized as *dogshin*, mountain wildlife characterized as *dogshin*, and *dogshin* Buddhist protectors whose images are seen at significant sites throughout town and who are evoked to destroy internal polluting thoughts and passions. Protection against these internal defilements in turn protects the landscape from defilement. The monument tied together wildlife, shamanism, and Buddhism by evoking this triple application of *dogshin*. It was clearly not an *ovoo*, however. Both the prominent local shaman and the head monk at Erdene Zuu, H. Baasansüren, denied that shamans or monks had had anything to do with this structure, which they defined as having been done “wrong” (*Mo. buruu*) – particularly the wolverine pelt. Both asserted that people who believed they were shamans but hadn’t had the right training might have built it. It was seen as a personal expression of spiritual conviction, but one that did not fit with various official or authoritative interpretations of landscape protection.
- 20 At some point between 2002 and 2009, then, people in positions of spiritual power in Harhorin seem to have reached a consensus that wildlife parts should not be used in *ovoo* settings. The headquarters for the Orhon Valley World Heritage Site were built in Harhorin during that interval, and Mongolia’s laws against poaching had become stricter and more strongly enforced nationwide, although rangers for Hangai Nuruu National Park, headquartered in Tsetserleg District in Arhangai Province, seemed no more visible or active than when I’d been there as a Peace Corps volunteer. The head

monk at Erdene Zuu, when I talked to him about the Ecology Temple and his work to boost a Buddhist environmental ethic, told me that the skulls and pelts had been removed from Hangai Owoo because such decorations were not in keeping with wildlife protection⁴. He had been part of a group of monks who had worked with an American organization, the Tributary Fund, that existed to promote religious leadership on environmental issues. He had traveled to the US several times to participate in workshops on environmental advocacy, law enforcement, and education. In one such workshop, an American FBI agent discussed law enforcement against poachers, and showed slide after slide of confiscated wildlife parts, with a clear message that such parts were indicative of criminal activity against nature. What role these different currents of foreign, local, and national-level discourse played in the shift away from wildlife parts at the *ovoo* is unclear, and the local decline of some wildlife populations may also have played a role in the transition. But the absence was notable for someone who had spent time at the *ovoo* earlier and grown accustomed to the staring skulls and the multi-textured experience of ritual scarves, pelts, wood, rock, bone, and horn.

- 21 It was in 2009, too, that I first heard from my friend Oyuna that the local *lus* were reputed to like outsiders (Mo. *gadaad*) – by which she meant people who were not from Harhorin, whether Mongolian or international. This perception came from the fact that a man from another region of Mongolia had come and set up a business and had success. Jokingly, my friend speculated that maybe the local *lus* were female and had taken a liking to him because he was good-looking. She also speculated that these *lus* were why I had felt compelled to return to Harhorin after seven years. *Lus* are equivalent to Sanskrit *nāgas*, loosely classed as lower-order land-protectors within the Buddhist spiritual hierarchy. But the Harhorin *lus* seemed unmoored from a strictly Buddhist context, at least in the stories of my friends and fellow-teachers. These were the same beings who would grow angry with me if I misbehaved around the river, the same beings who were reputed to have sent floods after a group of high school students celebrating graduation on the banks of the Orhon had slaughtered a sheep and gotten blood in the water a few years before I first arrived, and the same beings who, according to the shaman, sent the colorful and rare birds that I saw when I was conducting bird-count transects.
- 22 When I pressed Oyuna during that 2009 conversation for more details about why Harhorin’s particular *lus* might like foreigners, we had an exchange that we’d had, in one version or another, many times in the past:
- You always ask these kinds of questions. You’re always interested in this kind of thing. But it’s not like there are answers to this question the way you think. It’s just in your head. Whatever a person thinks, that’s what happens. With *ovoos*, with *lus* – it’s in your head. If you pay attention, then those things will pay attention to you. But if you don’t pay attention, then they won’t pay attention back.
- 23 Oyuna’s insistence on a personal interpretation of the behavior of *ovoos* and the entities associated with them seemed to contrast with notions of strongly codified behavior around *ovoos*, as described in much of the Western scholarly literature on the topic. Badamgarav Dovchin, a Mongolian scholar doing her PhD in the US on the topic of community-based rangeland management, during a rambling conversation about *ovoos* and Buddhism, defined Buddhism as categorically foreign. Beneath Buddhist influence was, allegedly, a more original, authentic, and local set of spiritual practices that encompassed both shamanism and *ovoo* worship. The implication from both of these conversations was that the only real appeal to a “correct” form of *ovoo* practice could

be made on the basis of dismantling notions that there was a correct form of *ovoo* practice. Authentic *ovoo* practices, insofar as they actually exist, are personally and locally defined. In Badamgarav's PhD student's summary, these personal and local practices are the root of an ecocultural relationship that sustains, in her words, "a biophilia and topophilia that are essentially Mongolian".

- 24 Hangai *Ovoo*, between 2000 and 2011, had been a site of various mediations between the landscape, local custom, and crossing currents of outside influence. In the disparate views on *ovoo* above, the interpretation of how to connect people and the landscape through *ovoos*, wildlife parts, and ritual practice incorporate both scientific, western ideas of protection, which largely set aside and keep wildlife and landscape separate from humans, and notions of protection that draw more strongly on integration of beings across these boundaries. Authority and individual action co-exist and mingle in the same landscape to create practices that seek to guard the landscape, and the people within it, in various ways.

The Darhad valley

- 25 A very different arrangement of local and outsider inputs exists in the second region of Mongolia in which I work and interact with *ovoos*. In 2010, I began doing wildlife research in the Darhad Valley, a vast, mountain-encircled depression in Hövsgöl Province. The Darhad is part of the same rifting system that formed both Lake Baikal and Lake Hövsgöl, and is accessible only via high mountain passes, lending the remote region an aura of separation from the rest of the country. This separation is a characteristic prized by many of the inhabitants. Darhad, Buryat, Halh, and Duha (also known as Tsaatan) peoples share the valley and its surrounding mountains, and the dialect and local toponyms contain an array of words that baffle even proficient Halh speakers – other Mongolians and Americans alike. Darhad and Duha shamans are reputed to be the most powerful in Mongolia, and this power is attributed to both the wild natural environment, and to the lack of interference from Buddhism. Despite (or because of) the fact that the region was a Buddhist monastic estate for several centuries, Buddhist lamas are not generally welcome in the Darhad. In addition to (and sometimes instead of) Buddhist-inflected *lus*, local stories often revolve around "half-people" (Mo. *badagshin*) who can bring benefit or cause mischief, depending on the behavior of individual people (Pedersen 2007). Numerous people told me that lamas were chased out when they tried to reestablish a Buddhist temple in the valley in the 1990s, and said that any lama who tried to return would be chased out again. Temporary visits seemed acceptable, though; in summer of 2018, as we drove by a group of lamas encamped near a spring, my driver shrugged off their presence, explaining that monks came to meditate at that spring every year. This contrasted with a conversation with a ranger, Bold, as we did pika (*Ochotona daurica*) surveys amidst the remains of the enormous monastery that had been destroyed in the 1930s. Although he didn't think that the destruction and murder had been good or necessary, Bold said that Buddhism had been bad for the region, and that *ovoos* were the original religion. When pressed about the region's *ovoos*, though, he spoke about loss of that tradition and uncertainty in reestablishing it:

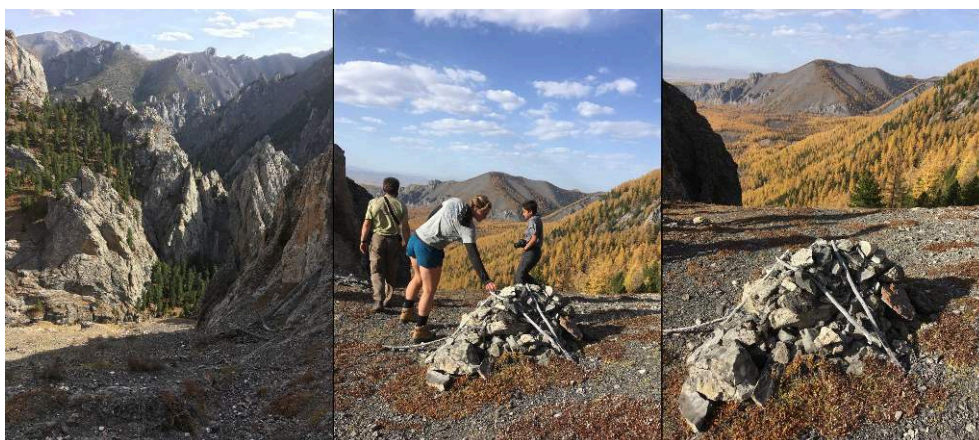
Each region [of the Darhad] has an *ovoo*. Our *ovoo* is Mungarag, but if you herd in another part of the valley, you worship at that *ovoo*. The local families in that region

take charge of worshipping the ovoo. There are four... maybe five? That's what I think, anyway. But no one really remembers clearly any more what ovoo you're supposed to worship or exactly how. For seventy years all the traditions were broken. People still worshipped, but not the right way. They did it secretly. Now we're reinventing everything.

- 26 The rejection of foreign or outsider influence was also integral to the story of the formation of two of the three protected areas that surround the valley. In 2010, when I first traveled to the Darhad, only one of these protected areas existed. Horidol Sar'dag SPA (Strictly Protected Area) was created in 1997, in large part to protect the country's northernmost herd of argali sheep, which had dwindled to around thirty individuals. I was initially interested in the Darhad region because it was the largest section of modeled wolverine habitat in Mongolia, but when I first arrived, much of that habitat was inaccessible due to the presence of "dangerous" gold miners in Ulaan Taiga, the range to the west of the valley. These independent miners had shown up after the community had objected to the licensing of the mountains to foreign exploration companies, and had chased out a number of geologists who had shown up with excavators (Zhal, personal communication, 2018). But a gold rush followed, and soon hundreds of artisanal miners were digging in the headwaters of the Nogoos River and wreaking social and economic havoc on local districts (*sum*), where demands for goods drove up prices, and where various local inhabitants, including reindeer herders, were roped into the mining endeavor, either as suppliers of goods and services, or as miners themselves. This unsettling situation in the taiga, characterized at the time and subsequently as an invasion of outsiders, lent strength to petitions to form two new protected areas, Ulaan Taiga SPA and Tengis Shishged National Park. The granting of protected status by Parliament requires 70% support among the local population. According to Tömörsüh Zhal, the current director of the parks, a man born and raised in the Darhad, and the originator of the petitions, the support was easy to obtain. In 2012, the parks were formed, and immediately thereafter, a sweep of the Nogoos River Valley scattered the miners and destroyed their camps. The three protected areas were placed under a single office, the Ulaan Taiga Strictly Protected Areas Administration, which employs thirty-four rangers and five staff and operates out of a small headquarters in Ulaan Uul District.
- 27 With the outsiders gone, however, local community members faced the sudden realization that the restrictions on resource use also applied to them. This was a less palatable reality than reclaiming Ulaan Taiga from outsiders. Although some people wanted to resume gold mining, the greater concern revolved around the loss of hunting rights, rights to the gathering of plants, and accessibility of some sites that were now in off-limit core zones (*ongon bus*) of the SPAs. In conversation, these losses were sometimes framed as economic or resource losses, but often they were described as throwing relationships out of balance, or severing those relationships entirely. In 2015, Tömörsüh related a claim from the Duha that with Duha hunting rights restricted in Tengis Shishged NP, the sable (*Martes zibellina*) population had grown too large, and packs of sable had taken to attacking reindeer. This seems unlikely based on what we understand about sable biology, and Tömörsüh said the claim was a waste of his rangers' time, but it points to a frustration that a particular type of human-wildlife relationship had been outlawed, with consequences for human-livestock relationships. In other words, throwing one relationship out of balance through unnatural, new, human laws disordered other relationships and turned them unnatural as well.

- 28 For the rangers of the Ulaan Taiga Strictly Protected Areas Administration, who represent both the traditions of their Darhad “homeland” (Mo. *nutag*) and the authority of the protected areas, relationship with the land they were tasked with protecting was sometimes expressed through *ovoo* building. On two occasions, rangers showed me ovoos that they had built. In one case, a ranger called Ölzii built an *ovoo* on a high ridge in a remote valley close to the Russian border while I set up a camera trap for snow leopards. Few people visited that particular area, as it was off limits by order of the national border patrol, which requires permits for anyone traveling within a certain distance of the border, and refuses permits to certain regions. Ölzii’s was the only *ovoo* that I saw in that valley. He explained that he had been moved to build it by the beauty and the power of the place, the commanding view of the area from the ridge, and the thought that someone else might someday come up that ridge and want to honor that place by placing stones on the *ovoo*.
- 29 The second *ovoo* was in a less remote but still largely untraveled location, a narrow notch that led through the sheer, nearly impassable western front of the Horidol Sar’dag Range and up into the high country. It was a frequent travel route for ibex, elk (*Cervus elaphas*), and boar (*Sus scrofa*). The ranger, Byambaa, regularly patrolled the pass to look for poachers and keep tabs on the wildlife. He first led a group of American students up to the notch to set a camera while I set up a camera in a different location with a different group of students, so I did not see him explain the *ovoo*, and I did not see the *ovoo* itself until later. But the students returned to our base camp enthusing about the *ovoo* and about how Byambaa had built it for reasons similar to those that Ölzii described to me: it was a high place with a spectacular view, a place to which Byambaa felt a connection, and a place where others might share his acknowledgement by building the *ovoo* higher. The *ovoo* itself was small, a knee-high pile of rocks, to which we all faithfully added stones when we later visited to switch out the camera cards. The students were enthusiastic participants in circumambulation at other ovoos that we encountered during high elevation field research trips, and accompanying rangers approved of their facility at these sites. Many of the students, in a post-program evaluation, talked about how the experience of Byamba sharing the *ovoo* had changed their perceptions about the possible ways that people could relate to the environment.

Figure 4. Huzuuvch landscape, Darhad, 2018



© Rebecca Watters

- 30 One day, in November of 2018, I drove with Tömörsüh to the provincial capital to deal with some banking business. We drove out over Eliin Davaa, where an enormous ovoos overlooks the gateway to the Darhad. The central ovoos is flanked by twelve smaller ovoos, one for each of the Asian zodiac years; travelers are encouraged to find the ovoos bearing the plaque with their zodiac animal carved on it and leave an offering⁵. There are also several signs welcoming visitors to the protected areas, in both Mongolian and English; a billboard with photos of flagship wildlife species like snow leopard; poetic odes to the Blue Valley of the Darhad carved on granite; and stone sculptures and carved relief images of wildlife including marmots, otters, and elk. A stop at these ovoos is mandatory when entering or leaving the Darhad. When we stopped on this trip, I asked Tömörsüh whether ovoos were places where nature was protected, and whether they were part of an ethic that he wanted to reinforce. He said yes, but when I asked how they functioned to protect nature, his response seemed counterintuitive to American concepts of conservation. Ovoos, he said, were places where people made requests for good fortune in various endeavors.
- 31 To me as an American, even after eighteen years of working in Mongolia and talking about ovoos, the concept of taking from the natural world – requesting a successful hunt, for example, or even success in other parts of life – did not seem entirely compatible or strictly aligned with protecting nature. In directing the protected areas, Tömörsüh was adept at negotiating the boundaries between foreign expectations and Mongolian ideals, and had multiple ties to international NGOs, including mine, as well as a sister relationship with Yosemite National Park in the US. But as in so many prior conversations with other Mongolians, I felt like I couldn't entirely clarify what I was trying to ask, and that he didn't fully understand the connotations of "protection" to the American mind. It was a divide, not unbridgeable, but one that required conscious and deliberate reflection about what it meant to "do conservation" as an American scientist in Mongolia, and as a Mongolian working with American scientists.

The ovoos as hearth, the mountain as home

- 32 So where do ovoos fit in to the encounter between Western and Mongolian value systems around ecology and human-nature relationships? Numerous international projects import Western ideas about conservation, ecology, science, and nature protection into their work with Mongolian institutions and communities. These Mongolian institutions and communities are in turn inflected by seven decades of technocratic socialist rule and a long history of adapting outside ideas and technologies to Mongolian purposes. Positing some form of pure traditional nature worship among Mongolians would be naïve, and yet there is no doubt that there is some relationship with nature that is different from the nature protection practices that have arisen in the West over the past several centuries. Where do ovoos serve as a bridge among these varied understandings?
- 33 Those early conversations in which my fellow teachers in Harhorin simultaneously and urgently tested my understanding of customs for visiting both yurts (*Mo. ger*) and the landscape suggest that ovoos serve as a basis for social interactions with the natural world. The spatial and gift-giving interactions with the ovoos mirror and parallel the spatial and gift-giving interactions of a visit to a yurt. Pedersen (2009) has written about ovoos as "a home away from home" for the Duha reindeer herders of the Darhad,

but his work is concerned primarily with the spatial arrangements of nomadic societies, rather than the specific social nature of human-nature relationships. Humphrey (1995) draw parallels between the spatial arrangements inside the yurt, and the terminology used to describe different parts of the mountain. Here, though, I am interested in the ways that sociality is carried out in parallel ways around the yurt's hearth and the mountain's *ovoo*. The bringing of a gift to the host, and the clockwise movement around the hearth, are similar to the bringing of a gift to and the clockwise movement around the *ovoo*. The host in the case of the mountain is the invisible "owner" or "master" (*Mo. ezen*), and while *ezen* are not characterized in anything like human terms, they nevertheless have the power to feed and shelter welcomed guests in the same way that the owners of a yurt feed and shelter guests. An embedded ethic of reciprocity exists in both instances as well. Mongolian friends always explain the vast hospitality of the steppes as an insurance system against future hardship: you welcome a guest because next time you might be in need of food and shelter. This ethic is, I think, the key to that gap in understanding in discussions about nature protection like the one I had with Tömörsüh at Eliin Davaa. When you take shelter and food from a family in a yurt, that action contains an implicit contract for mutual assistance. This is also the case when a human visits the *ovoo* – the mountain's hearth – and accepts the gifts of fortune and resources from the landscape. To take is to accept a reciprocal role as giver, which is how beckoning fortune at *ovoos*, for life or the hunt, constitutes an act of nature protection. Where Western practices of conservation often seek to set aside areas of wilderness – by definition, places absent of human presence – and to keep nature remote, Mongolian practices seek to become closer and more intimate, more social, and more at-home-with the natural, wild, non-domestic world. Nevertheless, this wild and non-domestic space is seen as the natural habitat of people as well as wildlife, and something to which humans are subject, rather than something over which humans have mastery.

- 34 By establishing *ovoos* in remote locations that they are tasked with protecting, the rangers of Ulaan Taiga are, in some sense, constructing sites where these social contracts of reciprocity with the mountains may be enacted and affirmed, by themselves and by future visitors. These personal *ovoos* are not sites of communal ritual or reinforcement of hierarchy; they are individual expressions of connection that are unlikely to ever serve a wider political or human social purpose through elaborate communal ceremonies. Instead, the ease and willingness with which many Mongolian men have welcomed both me and my companions to *ovoo* sites may be seen as a mirror to the way that their wives have welcomed us into their yurts. This is not to say that the gendered lines between the human home and the mountain-as-home are as strict as they are sometimes portrayed – not once in a field situation, except at Otgontenger, has anyone ever brought up with me the idea that women are not permitted at *ovoos* or on mountain peaks – but that these sorts of social visiting customs cross contexts and indicate a particular type of relationship with the natural world that is very different from the American or European concept.
- 35 Rebecca Empson (2012, pp. 11-12), in her exploration of fortune as a fluid force in nomadic life, discusses the way in which aesthetic objects can serve as arbiters of relationships, and the way that relationships themselves can be considered aesthetic creations that can then be judged as moral or immoral. *Ovoos* are aesthetic objects, constructed by many hands over many years, and are often alive with colors, textures, scents, compositions, and perspectives that are sensory and that guide a sense of

relationship all at once. The formation of these relationships with mountains allows humans to harness fortune, but, as Empson points out, this harnessing is not the same as the giving of a set amount of fortune by some all-powerful entity in return for a particular ritual act. The giver is never clearly defined, but the relationship must be renewed and maintained to keep it in balance and to ensure a flow of fortune to the person involved. The relationship itself is the generator of the fortune. The relationship keeps fortune flowing in both directions, both the gathering-too and the scattering-from, and humans may give as well as take.

- 36 Most of Western conservation practice is grounded in Western and capitalist philosophical and economic ideas that assume transactional relationships, whether between humans, or between humans and the non-human natural world – see, for example, the idea of “ecosystem services” that is a key conservation tool in Western capitalist countries (for example, Brown *et al.* 2007). Ongoing reciprocal relationships may be valued in these conservation strategies as “cultural values” or as “traditional knowledge”; outside of literature by indigenous scholars, they are seldom framed as a modern, immediate, scientifically or economically relevant conservation practice or ethic. Conservation practice, particularly as driven by larger international organizations and funders, focuses ever more heavily on creating quantifiable transactional metrics to assess success. There is therefore often a mismatch of assumptions and objectives in international conservation projects when they come into Mongolia. A greater effort to understand the basis and nature of human-nature relationships in Mongolia has the potential to benefit Western conservation and science by reframing the potential for different kind of relationships with the natural world.
- 37 Humphrey and Ujeed (2013, p. 50), in their work on Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, note that Mongolian spiritual practices often incorporate “transmutable keys”, concepts that can be interpreted or practiced at multiple levels, beyond orthodox religious definitions, to accommodate different individual perspectives and experiences. Ovoos, in the context of both spiritual and conservation practices, may be seen as another type of transmutable key. At one level, ovoos are political and social organizing tools for Mongolians, and the ceremonies surrounding them have implications for how human social and political relationships are managed (see Smith 2015; Madison Pískatá, this volume). But ovoos also function in diverse personal and individual modes. For individual rangers, the construction or ritual interactions with ovoos may provide a way to express reciprocal agreements of sociality and caretaking with the mountains and passes of the parks that they patrol.
- 38 Ovoos are also transmutable in that they permit a cross-referenced definition of conservation practice for Mongolians and Westerners. For Mongolian rangers, socializing Western conservation visitors with the landscape is important, as it creates relationships – and their potential fortune-bringing effects – between Mongolians and Westerners and between Westerners and the landscape. For Western scientists and conservationists, ovoos affirm that a conservation ethic exists in Mongolia and that at some level, Mongolians and Westerners are operating with a shared set of values when they undertake conservation projects together. If those values are not always precisely defined, the lack of definition often allows for stronger alliances, and, from the Mongolian perspective, a way of situating not only the landscape, but also foreign attitudes towards nature, within a set of familiar domestic interactions. The long

history of dialogue and spiritual encounter at ovoos between Buddhist and indigenous Mongolian mountain practices has been documented (for example, see Sneath 2010, 2018); similarly, ovoos are places where encounters and dialogues between Mongolian and Western science also occur.

- 39 Ovoos stories and practices serve specific functions at higher levels of social organization and politics, but are flexible at the individual level, as indicated by the repeated injunctions to remember that whatever meaning I tried to assign to ovoos, meaning itself was “in your head”. As I recounted this story to Badamgarav, my PhD student friend, and talked frankly about how difficult it may be for Westerners to let go of a search for absolute and authoritative meaning, she explained it in the following terms:
- That’s true, you can’t say that there’s a start and an end to a story when you ask about things like that. In general, Mongolians are going to tell you the middle of the story. And then whatever’s in the middle, you make the start and the end. It’s up to you.
- 40 Whatever role ovoos practices serve in ongoing conservation narratives as the encounter between Western conservation and Mongolian conservation continues, it seems that the meaning itself circles the ovoos, keeping it at the center, as the individuals concerned add their stories, one by one.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, T., J. Bergstrom & J. Loomis 2007 Defining, valuing, and providing ecosystem services, *Natural Resources* 47, pp. 329-379.
- Charlier, B. 2015 *Faces of the Wolf. Managing the Human-Non-human Boundary in Mongolia* (Leiden/Boston, Brill).
- Empson, R. 2012 The dangers of excess, *Social Analysis* 56(1), pp. 1-16.
- Gerasimova, K. M. 1981 De la signification du nombre 13 dans le culte des obo, translated by R. Hamayon & A. Popova, *Études mongoles et sibériennes* 12, pp. 163-175.
- Humphrey, C. 1995 Chiefly and shamanist landscapes in Mongolia, in E. Hirsch & M. O’Hanlon (eds), *The Anthropology of Landscapes. Perspectives on Place and Space* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 135-162.
- Humphrey, C. & H. Ujeed. 2012 Fortune in the wind. An impersonal subjectivity, *The International Journal of Anthropology* 56(2), pp. 152-167.
- 2013 *A Monastery in Time* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press).
- Humphrey, C., M. Mongush & B. Telengid 1993 Attitudes to nature in Mongolia and Tuva. A preliminary report, *Nomadic Peoples* 33, pp. 51-61.
- Kaczynsky, P. 2007 Wildlife value orientations of rural Mongolians, *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* 12, pp. 317-329.
- Kennedy, J. F. 1961 Executive Order 10924 of March 1, 1961, Establishment and Administration of the Peace Corps, Federal Register 26 FR 1789, Thursday, March 2, 1961.

- Lindskog, B. 2016 Ritual offerings to ovoos among nomadic Halh herders of west-central Mongolia, *Études mongoles & sibériennes, centrasiatiques & tibétaines* 47, pp. 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.2740>.
- Pedersen, M. 2007 Multiplicity without myth. Theorizing Darhad perspectivism, in special issue *Perspectivism, Inner Asia* 9(2), pp. 311-328.
- 2009 At home away from homes. Navigating the taiga in Northern Mongolia, in P. W. Kirby (ed.), *Boundless Worlds. An Anthropological Approach to Movement* (New York, Berghahn Books), pp. 135-152.
2011. *Not Quite Shamans. Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press).
- Reading, R. 2006 Conserving biodiversity on Mongolian rangelands. Implications for protected area development and pastoral uses, *Rangelands of Central Asia*, USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS, p. 39.
- Smith, M. J. 2015 Treasure Underfoot and Far Away. Mining, Foreignness, and Friendship in Contemporary Mongolia. PhD dissertation (Princeton, Princeton University) [online, URL: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01z603r0748>, accessed 5 October 2019].
- Sneath, D. 2010 Political mobilization and the construction of collective identity in Mongolia, *Central Asian Survey* 29(3), pp. 251-267.
- [2014] 2018 Nationalizing civilizational resources. Sacred mountains and cosmopolitical ritual in Mongolia, in *Mongolia Remade. Post-socialist National Culture, Political Economy, and Cosmopolitics* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press), pp. 175-192.
- West, P, J. Igoe & D. Brockington 2006. Parks and peoples. The social impact of protected areas, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, pp. 251-277.

NOTES

1. By “Western” conservation, I reference the schools of thought and practice that have grown out of the work of conservationists such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold – that is, men who inherited the legacy of a colonized environment in which the scarce remnants of an “original” (pre-colonial) natural state had to be fought for and protected. The primary means of protection was the exclusion of people, including and perhaps especially the indigenous inhabitants of the land. These thinkers, in turn, influenced men such as Michael Soule, E. O. Wilson, and others whose scientific theories have largely guided the way that international conservation practice is enacted. I do not include the socialist-era practices of Russian or Mongolian conservationists in the “Western conservation” definition because that approach has a distinctly different line of descent.
2. The Peace Corps is an American volunteer organization established by executive order of President John F. Kennedy in 1961: “The Peace Corps shall be responsible for the training and service abroad of men and women of the United States in new programs of assistance to nations and areas of the world, and in conjunction with or in support of existing economic assistance programs of the United States and of the United Nations and other international organizations” (Kennedy 1961).
3. The temple was also known as Lusyn hiid, or “Temple of the Lus”.
4. Unfortunately I did not ask how or when these removals were initiated.
5. The ovoos on Eliin Davaa are explicitly associated with the zodiac, but the number thirteen is significant to ovoos worship in other contexts. See, for example, Gerasimova 1981.

ABSTRACTS

This paper explores *ovoos* and landscape practices in two regions of Mongolia, Harhorin, and the way that these places deal with local and outsider inputs in constructing dialogues about conservation. While much has been written about formal *ovoos* practices, their origins, and their historical and contemporary role in local and national politics, this paper focuses on individual experiences with and definitions of *ovoos*, how those intersect with more formal practices, and what *ovoos* may indicate for conservation.

Cet article explore les pratiques concernant les *ovoos* et le paysage dans deux régions de Mongolie, Harhorin dans la province Övörhangai et la vallée Darhad dans la province Hövsgöl, et la manière dont se forment en ces lieux des discours sur la conservation à partir d'apports locaux et extérieurs. Bien que les pratiques formelles concernant les *ovoos*, leurs origines et leur rôle historique et contemporain dans la politique locale et nationale aient été abondamment traités dans la littérature académique, cet article se concentre sur les expériences individuelles avec les *ovoos* et les définitions que l'on peut en donner, sur la manière dont celles-ci recourent des pratiques plus formelles, et sur ce qu'elles nous apprennent sur la conservation.

INDEX

Mots-clés: *ovoos*, conservation, faune sauvage, bouddhisme, Mongolie, glouton, carcajou

Keywords: *ovoos*, conservation, wildlife, Buddhism, Mongolia, wolverine

AUTHOR

REBECCA WATTERS

Rebecca Watters is a wildlife biologist working primarily on wolverines and cultural relationships with wildlife in Mongolia and the Greater Yellowstone region United States. She is the executive director of the Wolverine Foundation and is based in Ulaan Uul, Mongolia and Bozeman, Montana.

watters.rj@gmail.com