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Benedikte V. Lindskog



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Offrandes rituelles aux ovoos chez les éleveurs nomades halh du centre-ouest de la Mongolie

Benedikte V. Lindskog

Ritual offerings to ovoos among nomadic Halh¹ herders of west-central Mongolia

You know, now when I am old, I miss my natal homeland (*törsön nutag*). But I went to do ovoos offering in Tsagaan Süm. You were there [...]. We gave offerings to Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo. I also went to see my own birth stone (*hüis törsön chuluu*) in Tsagaan Süm. I have done that many times. During socialism (*sotsializm tsagd*), all our ovoos were destroyed. Doing ovoos offerings is very important for us now and we need do it every year. The nature of our homeland is dear to us and we must offer milk every day. We have a strong tradition when it comes to “nature rules” (*baigaliin yos*), and we must follow this and make offerings so we can avoid hardship in our homeland (*nutgiin zovlon*).

Chimedbaildir (aged 80)

- 1 The herder Chimedbaildir’s sentiments towards his natal homeland and its nature, and the value he places on making offerings to ovoos (sacred cairns for offering to the spirits of the land), reflect topics that are central to the discussion in this article. Two aspects, in particular, are analysed: the ritual dynamics through which social relations are objectified through the land and its entities, and the importance placed by the herders on establishing, through ritual offerings, relations of protection, exchange and alliance with the spirits of the land, that is, the *gazryn ezed* – the “masters of the land”.
- 2 This article describes the role of ritual offerings at local ovoos (*ovooni tahilga*)² among nomadic herders in Arhangai Province, west-central Mongolia. Its analytical focus is on the very *doing* of ovoos offerings and how the *doing* of an ovoos offering relates to

fundamental ontological notions tied to *baidal* (“the state of things [as they are]”) and *baigal* (“that which is” [nature]). From this approach, it is argued that in the case of *ovoo* offerings, the *doing* of ritual is privileged over the *understanding* of ritual (Evens 2008, p. 188). The emphasis on “the doing” rather than “the understanding” reflects Lindquist’s (2008, p. 117) argument of Tuvans’ relationship to spirits, outside or inside ritual contexts, that “the existence of spirits is not a matter of belief [...] it is a matter of social practice.”

- 3 The ethnography presented is drawn from a smaller *ovoo* offering held in the district of Tsenher in 2003, officiated by a Buddhist lama and including Buddhist texts and artefacts. However, the article does not focus explicitly on the dynamics pertaining to Buddhist aspects of the offering nor on intrinsic meanings or symbolic connotations of the Buddhist practises and procedures therein. Rather, a general description and discussion of *ovoo* offerings, and one local offering, in Mongolia are presented. It describes how ritual enactments of offering to local *ovoos* tie in with the facticity of the present societal, economic and environmental challenges the herders of Mongolia are facing. Following this line of thought, I propose that in order to locate the herders’ own commitment to ritual practices and the importance given to them, we must seek to explore the sociality of these practices in a way that appreciates people’s pragmatic concerns. For the herders in Tsenher district, the quintessential aspect of ritual offerings to *ovoos* is embedded in the maintenance of a reciprocal and beneficial relation with the “masters of the land” (*gazryn ezed*). Similar to Lindquist’s observations for Tuva, the Mongol Halh herders’ relationship with the spirits is “pragmatic, invoking them as living counterparts in actions aimed at practical ends” (2008, p. 117).
- 4 An important starting point for understanding how offerings to *ovoos* tie in with herders’ perception of land, “nature” and the “masters of the land” (*gazryn ezed*) is to attend to how the herders themselves *do* their relations – with humans as well as non-humans – and the manner in which these are comprehensively and dynamically assembled. The ritual context of the *ovoo* offering provides for people of a homeland (*nutag*) a locus through which the *gazryn ezed* can be propitiated, relations of auspiciousness between humans and spirits can be (re)established and future fortune can be asked for. Within the framework of precariousness that many herders have faced the past two decades due to severe recurrent winter calamities (*zud*), along with heightened economic insecurity, the *ovoo* offering ritual stand out as a significant event for creating feelings of fellowship and solidarity among homeland-people. But most importantly, it offers a moment in time when balance (*tentsver*) in “nature” can potentially be restored and prosperity can potentially increase.
- 5 Over two years of ethnographic research conducted in camps with nomadic herders in the districts of Tsenher and Erdenebulgan located in the west-central province of Arhangai inform the descriptions and analysis presented. The main bulk of research was carried out in 1996 and 2003 and a five-month period in 2011, and focused on spatial, social and ritual organisation as well as management of natural calamities among nomadic herders. The periods of fieldwork were based on observation of, and participation in, daily life, as well as in certain ritualised events that took place. While most of my own knowledge derives from living and moving together with the herders, formal and informal interviews were undertaken with herders in the area as well as with people within various positions in the district centre.

- 6 In 2003 I spent 10 months in the valley of Sairin Bürt in the area of Tsenher, an administrative district (*sum*) located in the southern part of the province of Arhangai which is part of the eco-region of the Hangai mountain range characterised by mountains, wooded areas, rivers, meadows and steppes. The large number of rivers and streams contribute to making this area one of the most fertile areas of Mongolia. The total population of Tsenher in 2006³ was 5481 people; 1503 families, 356 living in the *sum* centre and 1147 living as seasonally migrating herders. The total number of livestock in 2006 numbered 127 122⁴. The majority of the people of Tsenher Sum are involved in herding and today most families keep a mix of sheep, goats, horses and cattle. Most herders move seasonally between pastures, from two to six times every year; however, there are families close to the *sum* centre with small herds that do not move seasonally, only shifting when *zud* or drought compels them to go to reserve pastures (*otor*). The herders live in seasonal camps and the size of the *ger*-camps (*hot ail*) varies with the seasons. These camps are today composed primarily on the basis of kinship relations – cognatic and affinal kin – but can also incorporate friends and in some instances earlier comrades from the collective period during communism.

Ovoo⁵

- 7 The word *ovoo* means “heap” or “pile” (Evans & Humphrey 2003, p. 196). *Ovooloh* means to “heap up” and carries positive connotations linked to central conceptual values among Mongols, that of concentration or centring (*tövlöj*), “containing” (*aguulaj*) and the hierarchical superiority of that which is above (*deed*). The word *tarah*, meaning “to scatter”, can be seen as the antithesis of *ovooloh*, and is associated with loss and dispersal. As Chabros writes (1988, p. 34, original emphasis):
- The ideal daughter-in-law is *bal chixer ovoolson* [sic] met- like honey and sugar heaped up, while a bad one is associated with images of dispersal; she lets the fleece for felt-making blow away, *ungas noos xiisch*.
- 8 The “centripetal” (Da Col & Humphrey 2012) ritual process involved during an *ovoo* offering is manifested through acts wherein fortune (*hishig*) is “tied” to objects and receives its force through accumulation, encircling and centring.
- 9 A number of studies have been made on Mongolian *ovoos*, ranging from textual analyses of sutras used during *ovoo* rituals and detailed examinations of ritual proceedings to examinations of the *ovoos* physical layout and the various types of *ovoos*⁶. Additional works have explored the relationship between *ovoos* and Buddhist ideas of sacred land⁷, while others again have emphasised the politico-historical and social aspects of *ovoos* and ritual practices of offerings⁸. This article provides new ethnography on a local “*ovoo* with offerings” (*tahilgatai ovoo*) and its concomitant ritual practices.
- 10 In Mongolia, *ovoos* are found at mountain peaks, ridges, or on the slopes and hills and mountains. A large number of *ovoos* are also found along passes (*davaany ovoo*), roads and tracks (*zamin ovoo*), while others are found at or close to sacred mineral springs (*rashaany ovoo*), at the source of springs (*bulgiin ovoo*) or alongside lakes, ponds or rivers (*lusyn tahilgatai ovoo*) where water spirits are thought to reside (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 57). They can also be found beneath or close to a lone or oddly shaped tree, a special rock, or nearby a monastery or other sacred and venerated places.
- 11 The spiritual energies that dwell in the land are intermittently and colloquially, referred to by the herders as *nutgiin tengger* (homeland deity), *gazryn ezen* (master of the land), *uul*

usni ezen (master of mountains and waters) *hangaiin delhi* (mountain-steppe)⁹ and *lus savdag* (water and land spirits). These different terms all refer to chthonic spirit-entities of geographical localities and waters. In fact, during an offering to spirits of the land, all spirits of the land and waters are symbolically fused into a general offering to *gazryn ezen*, “the master of the land”. The *gazryn ezed*, despite the register of abilities or qualities they may hold, are generally not experienced or visualised by people in any concrete shape, that is, as substantial beings. Rather, the substantiality of these spirits is tied to particular and significant entities of the land. The *ovoo* neither contains a spirit(s) nor is the spirit (s)’ abode – it is a physical construction in the land where to the *gazryn ezed* can be summoned and interacted with by means of offerings of various kinds.

- 12 Within Mongolia there are now eight mountains that have been decreed sacred by the government (*Töriin tahilgatai uul*, lit. “mountain with a state offering”). State offering rituals are carried out by the state and are considered as a national event¹⁰. These sacred mountains, along with *ovoos* offered to at province level, are considered “places with big offerings” (*ih tahilgatai gazar*) (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 47) and are associated with grand ceremonies involving senior officials and high-ranking lamas. At the province and district levels, *ovoo* offerings are considered as “places with small offerings” (*bag tahilgatai gazar*) and are held at several significant *ovoos*. In some cases offerings occur on a yearly basis, in others on a three-year basis, and in yet others more infrequently.
- 13 *Ovoo* offerings are today performed throughout the whole of Mongolia. The content of the offering and the ritual procedures depend on the scope of the offering as well as on whether the officiating expert is a Buddhist lama or a shaman. In this article I focus mainly on a district offering that was led by the local Buddhist lama, an offering that can be characterised as small in scope. The “scope” of the ritual refers here more generally to the level of the offering, that is, whether the offering concerns the whole nation, the population of a province, the people of a district or a smaller group of homeland people, or a family. Offering rituals to the nation’s sacred mountains (*töriin tahilgatai uul*) for example, draw thousands of people from all over Mongolia. Offerings to a sacred mountain or hill of a province (*aimag*) are similar to national offerings, yet on a smaller scale. Offerings to significant *ovoos* at district level (*sum*) involve people from the district, especially those living close to or having been born in the area of the *ovoo*. During these offerings the district lama officiates the ritual. Finally, there are small offerings made to *ovoos* by groups of homeland people (*neg nutgiihan*) or herder families/seasonal settlements of kin and friends (*hot ail*). These are usually carried out without a ritual expert in an ad hoc fashion, especially during times of hardship, such as natural calamities. The presence of an officiating expert, either lama or shaman, clearly shapes the content and the dynamics of the offering. Furthermore, the expert is considered crucial for producing favourable outcomes of the offering, which again involves establishing grounds for a reciprocal and auspicious relation with the masters of the land. I argue that the smaller and local offering to an *ovoo* reflect a highly apotropaic form of ritual¹¹. It is a ritual that deals first and foremost with absolving immediate needs and warding off misfortune through establishing auspicious relations with the spirits. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, p. 261) have written that: “the ritual commitment itself is a social act.” The following description and analysis of *ovoo* offering rituals describe precisely the doing of *ovoo* offerings as “a commitment” and as a social act.

Political and economic transitions

- 14 The unarmed or “silent revolution” spurred on by students in Mongolia in 1990 marked the end of 70 years of communism and the beginning of liberal economic reforms, called *zah zeelin üye*, or “the Age of the Market.” During the communist era, religious and counter-communist ideas were banned, and attempts were made to eradicate them completely. The persecution, imprisonment and killing of Buddhist lamas and supposedly counter-revolutionary persons – at the end of the 1930s provide grim examples of such acts of “cleansing”¹². Most of the monasteries in Mongolia¹³ were torn down, and religious texts and paraphernalia were burned or destroyed. Many lamas were forced to defrock and to take up pastoral herding or other forms of skilled or semi-skilled labour (Rosenberg 1981, p. 28). Following the razing of most ovoos in the late 1930s onwards¹⁴, the significance of owoo offerings as collective and integrative ritual events for those identifying themselves as one homeland people (*neg nutgiinhan*) was lost. Thus, the notion of *nutag* (“homeland”) as a framework for expressing communality through collectively staged offerings had already lost its value 20 years before virtually all of Mongolia’s herders had become part of the collective (*negdel*) economy in 1959. The strict control of herders’ movements and the socio-economic structuring of their labour in the *negdel* period further contributed to undermining the social and ritual constitution of territorial bonds.
- 15 In the wake of the demise of the communist state, Mongols experienced withdrawal of the former social support system and state subsidies, privatisation of earlier public assets and state run enterprises and farms, introduction of free markets and price liberalisation, and dismantling of pastoral collectives. The last two decades, characterised by the Mongols as the “unstable time of the market economy” (*zah zeeliin oroo busгаа*), have had an adverse effect on herders’ lives in Mongolia. Today, large numbers of herders face poverty and a deepened sense of fragility due to frequent onsets of winter calamities, minimum state support and a general lack of sustainable rural politics. Many have no other choice than to migrate to the capital Ulaanbaatar where the prospects for work and a better life are meagre.

Religious revival in a context of environmental and economic challenges

- 16 Significant changes have taken place in the past two decades, not only transforming the political and economic landscape of Mongolia, but also giving rise to processes of religious revival of Buddhism and shamanism. Most herders I have talked with were clear that their relations with the spirits of the land were not diminished during the strict non-religious policy and ideology that existed in communist Mongolia. Most people carried on their daily libations to *tengger*¹⁵, *gazryn ezed*, as well as to the spirit of the fire¹⁶. Staged owoo offerings came to an end with the purges of the 1930s when most ovoos, along with the monasteries, were demolished and their sacred texts (*sutra*) destroyed. From the 1990s to this day, ovoos have been rebuilt or created anew either by herders themselves, by district administrations or by monasteries, and can now be found all over Mongolia; some sutras have been recovered and others created anew; and monasteries have been re-erected.

- 17 Practices and perceptions concerning the forces of nature and human beings' place within nature are both conceptually and historically shaped by Mongolia's two religious traditions: Buddhism and shamanism. Among the west-central Halh herders, it is primarily Buddhism that has again come to play an important part in their lives. While Buddhism and shamanism as active constituents in people's daily lives were more or less eradicated during communism, many continued their religious practices "undercover", such as praying, offering milk to the masters of the land every day and lighting incense at the altar. Inspection by officials from the collectives would happen regularly, thus many herder families would for example bury the sutras from their forefathers in the ground under the tent (*ger*) or they kept them hidden under the floorboards. The old herder couple I lived together with for a year in 1996 had managed to hide their sutras throughout the communist period, though they related that it had cost them a great deal of anxiety throughout the years in fear of being discovered by the inspectors.
- 18 During fieldwork in 2003 I observed that the lama living in the temple situated in the district centre held an important position in people's lives in the district of Tsenher. He was deeply involved in the organisation and staging of *ovoos* offering rituals. In addition, the herders sought out the lama for support or consolation on various matters and needs, such as asking for blessings, death rituals, medical remedies or advice on personal problems and health issues, as well as guidance or prayers for counteracting misfortune or lack of fortune in life. Even though Buddhism was important to many, it became clear to me that, for the herders, the immediate concerns of health, wealth, prosperity and protection of the land – elements that were perceived as closely related to personal attitudes, knowledge and paths of action – were the most important. Despite an apparent lack of explicit reference to Buddhist cosmology or abstract notions of the moral self, the herders accentuated Buddhism as a mode of attitude towards life. Yet equally important to people's own understanding of their spiritual landscape and their own place in it were the forces in "nature" (*baigal*) and the perceived potential for repercussions from master (s) of the land.
- 19 In the context of rapid socio-economic change and subsequent neo-liberal macro-economic reforms that have been carried out since the demise of the communist state in 1990, the nomadic herders of Mongolia, including herders in the Arhangai province, have been compelled to reorganise their social and pastoral production. Many herders I have spoken to expressed that they felt abandoned by the Mongolian state, in contrast to communist times when the state, both for good and bad, was closely present in their lives and in the organisation of their pastoral production, providing social and economic security to the herder families in the collectives.
- 20 In conversations with herders during my fieldwork in 1996 there was still a sense of effervescence related to the transitions (*shiljilt*) that were occurring in Mongolia. There seemed to be a general consensus that the novel freedom to govern your own herd, claim your user rights to pastures, to extract the surplus from your own production for yourself, and to pursue your own religious and political convictions overrode the significance of the absence of social benefits, provisions and relief during winter calamities and the pooling of risk between herder families that earlier were secured by the state and the collectives. However, in conversations I had with herders during fieldwork in 2003, this enthusiasm and positive outlook on the present and the future seemed to have dwindled.

21 The idea of “freedom” thus appears as multifaceted, because one thing is to be free to pursue your own personal choices and interests, and for some, turning this freedom into various paths of fortune-making, another is to manage this within the constraints of herding life, to deal with sudden and sometimes devastating weather phenomena (*zud*), and to cope without the safety net of social security earlier provided by the communist state. Among herders in the valley of Sairin Bürt three elements were highlighted as significant management strategies to avoid the devastating effects of *zud*: First, cutting hay and fodder; second, to provide assistance to, and receive assistance from, ones homeland people (*nutgiinhan*); and third, to conduct *ovoo* offerings. The herder Mangaljav coined it this way:

To make offerings to the spirits of the land (*gazryn ezed*) and protecting the nature of our homeland (*nutag*) is very much needed for us herders and our homeland to prosper, and for us to avoid *zud* and drought.

22 In order for people, animals and land to prosper and to avoid hardship, good relations between people and the masters of the land must prevail. *Ovoo* offerings provide the most powerful event through which this relationship can be reinforced.

Offerings to *Ovoo*

23 The significant revival of offerings to ovoos (*ovooni tahlga*) happens today within a politico-religious framework that has changed considerably since the pre-communist era¹⁷. This change is not only shaped by the present weakened influence of Buddhism as a state religion and economic-administrative institution, but also related to how religious life is actually lived and expressed. As Hürelbaatar (2006, p. 209) has described for the Urads of Inner Mongolia, in PRC: “Their religious life is getting simpler, but more part of their everyday life”. I would contend that this description also holds true for the herders of the Arhangai province today. Staging an *ovoo* offering provides people with a concrete opportunity, as individuals and as a fellowship of homeland people, to engage in fortune-making on behalf of themselves, their animals and the wellbeing of the land. Many of the herders I spoke to considered *ovoo* offering as a significant means for restoring imbalances that either had caused onsets of winter calamities (*zud*), or could potentially bring them about. *Zud* is a term for various forms of extreme environmental hazards that occur due to a combination of drought in summer and a following cold and/or snowy winter causing high livestock mortality (Lindskog 2014, pp. 885-887)¹⁸.

24 Evans and Humphrey (2003), Sneath (2007) and Gerasimova (1981) have pointed to the close relationship historically between political hierarchy and ovoos, in particular how *ovoo* offerings have been moulded through politico-religious interventions to reflect and support the political environment of the time. This “moulding” is evident from various texts dating as far back as the 16th century. Some texts for offerings to ovoos of particular significance were created on the basis of decrees issued by political authorities. Among these are attempts to standardise or “regularise” ritual process and content (Evans & Humphrey 2003, p. 208) and to detail the very physical outline or layout of the *ovoo* itself¹⁹. In 1893, one particular text was produced by demand of the political authorities in order to counteract misdemeanour and general desperation among the laypeople, who had seen great losses in their herds due to natural calamities²⁰. Usually such texts pertain to the most sacred mountains of Mongolia, yet some are of a more general character, to be used

for various places or entities of religious and topographic significance, such as monasteries or sacred places in the land.

- 25 While many of the Buddhist texts are inaccessible to most laypeople in terms of literal understanding, there is nevertheless a highly sensuous accessibility when it comes to the actual soundscape produced through recitation as well as the perceived power of the words themselves. As Heissig (1980, p. 47) notes when referring to the various rituals of beckoning and blessings: “the magical power of the spoken word is of particular significance”. Where the specific text for an ovoos is lost, a general ovoos text (*niitleg sudar*) in Mongolian or Tibetan may be used instead. Although extensive parts of all ovoos texts relate to a Buddhist ritual canon in terms of wording, symbolic content and pantheon, the summoning of the masters and spirits of the land and waters of a particular homeland (*nutag*) generally plays a pivotal part in the prayer itself.
- 26 The ritual successions – beckoning, offering, purification – gain their intensity, I maintain, from the recital made in the Tibetan language despite its incomprehensibility to everybody apart from the lama himself. The indistinctness of the sounds produced by textual recital that cannot be literally understood can nonetheless be seen as establishing a numinous quality to the ritual moment and in the people present at the offering. What is said is essential, but that it is said is the most essential²¹.

Balance and connectedness

- 27 In her book, written together with Urgunge Onon, on shamanism among Daur Mongols, Caroline Humphrey (1996, p. 363) asks the Daur Mongol, Urgunge Onon about the idea of “balance” in the universe. He replies that: “The balance of diversity in the world is not an idea [...] it is a fact.” This “factuality” accurately reflects notions of balance (*tentsver*) that comprise how Halh herders of Arhangai engage with and understand the spiritual and natural world. Perceived notions of balance (*tentsver*) comprise a foundational ontological premise for Halh herders of west-central Mongolia to understand and engage with the spiritual and natural world. As the herder Semjee, with whom I shared camp during fieldwork in 2003, pointed out:

Herders’ lives, the pastures and the welfare of the animals are all based on this balance. The Mongolian nomadic way of life depends on this. So, the theory of balance is the theory of the Mongols [...]

- 28 According to Semjee the word *tentsver* refers more abstractly to the fundamental balance or equilibrium that should exist in “nature” (*baigal*) and in cosmos, along with *tegsh baidal* (an “ideal state of equality”) that he used to refer to the perceived ideal state of equality that should exist between two elements of a unified whole. From my own interpretation, based on how notions of “balance” were related to be me by the herders, it appears that a “state of imbalance” (*tentsvergüi baidal*) does not serve to disqualify or dissolve balance, but rather characterise a negative quality of the relation between parts of the balance, where the parts could be anything and arbitrary, yet always related. Balance then could be perceived as a totality encompassing the parts; that is, a totality embracing and saturating every minutia of cosmos. Put differently, while balance prevails as the ideal state of things – as a singular idea – imbalance(s), on the other hand, can be avoided by moral propriety, an appropriate state of mind and behaviour. It can further be actively reversed *post factum* through various acts such as prayer, purification, or through offerings at ovoos to the masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*).

- 29 How “nature” (*baigal*) is perceived, and ontologically explained as an encompassing reality “independent of human volition (but including human existence)” (Humphrey 2006, p. 99), also involves the idea that everything is fundamentally connected. Far from being grounded merely in observations of empirical facts and physical causality in “nature”, the Halh herders’ emphasis on *knowledge* of “nature” encompasses a wider mode of understanding of human and non-human (i.e. spirits) engagement in the world “where the realm of the social does not end with human beings; rather it knows no ending” (Pedersen 2001, p. 415). Ontologically, this implies that the relations between humans and humans, humans and spirits, as well as between spirits, are objectified through a sense of shared sociality (Fjeld & Lindskog, forthcoming). Maintaining balance in the encompassing “nature” is thus significant not only for producing, but also for receiving fortune and prosperity (*buyan hishig*) for the homeland. Attending to the various “rules of nature” (*baigaliin yos*) and making offerings to the spirits of the land at ovoos are pivotal to maintaining balance and to the accumulation and circulation of fortune in the homeland.

Offering to Lhachin Bavuu Dorjee Ovoo of Tsagaan Süm

- 30 At the very top of a narrow river valley on a meadow, beneath a small hill, stands Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo, locally referred to as Han Jargalant (“Happy King”). The ovoo is a smooth rock and has a small tree growing at its northern side. When standing in front of the rock, it looks as if the tree grows out of the stone itself. Unlike most ovoos found in Mongolia, this ovoo does not have a cairn made of stones or cone-shaped wooden sticks. It was abandoned during the communist era but not torn down due to its physical composition – being a solid rock. This ovoo is symbolically related to the Rashaani Ovoo and the Artsin Ovoo on hilltops in the vicinity of Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo. The Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo is located in Tsagaan Süm, a former monastic area south of the Tsenher Sum centre, towards the area of Orhon. The monastery of Tsagaan Süm was razed in the 1930s and little remains of the once influential institution.

Photo 1. Lhachin Bavuu Dorjee Ovoo



B. V. Lindskog

- 31 Both in terms of performativity and religious content, the revived *ovoo* ritual held at Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo, I was told, points towards a reconstitution that is very much in accordance with the Buddhist ritual proceedings of this particular *ovoo* before the persecution of lamas at the end of the 1930s²². As to the social constitution of the ceremonial context however, there is less proximity: women are now allowed to participate on an equal footing with men in the *ovoo* offering to Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo. This is in contrast to offerings to other mountains in the area, such as Altan Sair Mountain and Suvraga Hairhan Mountain, which are exclusively for men²³. The Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo offering ritual and the subsequent celebration also point towards an understanding of the *ovoo* offering as both an important ritual event *and* a collective event for expressing and nurturing a shared feeling of being one homeland people (*neg nutgiinhan*)²⁴. Sneath (1990, p. 314) has noted with reference to Barga Mongols in Inner Mongolia that: “as a cultural means of expressing solidarity, unity and the position of group with respect to other groups the *obo* ceremony is an excellent method.”
- 32 The offering to Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo took place during a summer morning on 20 July 2003. The auspiciousness of this day was deduced based on the reading of the Mongolian astrological calendar (*zurhain tsag ulirlin toony bichig*) for 2003 by Banzai lama, who was officiating in this particular offering. After the offering ritual was concluded all the participants either drove their cars or rode their horses down towards a steppe five kilometres from where it took place. This *ovoo* offering included people from the whole of Tsenher Sum – men, women and a few children. The gathering of people at Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo consisted of approximately 50 men and women seated on carpets covering the ground, while some older people had small stools to sit on. People’s relaxed behaviour

and hushed chit-chat highlighted a certain *modus operandi* of the offering ritual where reciprocity with the spirits of the land was emphasised through a relaxed sense of festivity. This was meant to create an auspicious event and to nurture the relation between the spirits and the people present.

- 33 On the day of the offering ritual, there were many blue silk scarves (*hadag*) tied to the tree and a white scarf was tied around its trunk. Underneath the tree and on top of the stone, nine dough figures looking like miniature stupas and painted in red were arranged. These were offering-cakes (*balin*) made from dough and often mixed with sugar, butter or sweets; they were presented by the lama to the masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*) and the Buddhist protective deity Hangarid Burhan that were summoned to join the ritual congregation at the *ovoo*. Other cakes, butter and dried cheese were scattered on top of the stone and were provided as general offerings (*zooglohyn tahil*). Beneath the *ovoo*, on its southern side, stood a wooden chest. Its top was covered with white and yellow silk cloths and a blue silk cloth was draped around the back of the chest's top. Upon the cloths lay five rows of sutras wrapped in silk cladding, with two more placed on the top of these. Around each stack of sutras were tied one red, one blue and one white silk scarf. In front of this chest was a pagoda-like altar with four levels, its front facing south. A large bowl filled to the rim with fermented mare's milk (*airag*) was in front of the altar. Four pieces of butter marking each cardinal direction were smeared on its rim, a practise that is common at weddings and other contexts of ceremonial importance in Mongolia. The food and milk that people had brought with them, along with the milk products contributed by those organising the offering, were placed all around the big woven woollen carpet that covered the ground in front of the *ovoo*.
- 34 Because we had arrived half an hour too late at the *ovoo*, we were unfortunate to have missed the first part of the offering: the acts of offering to the land (*tahih zan üil/gazryn zan üil*²⁵). Further details were later filled in by Banzai lama who officiated the offering:
- The *ovoo* offering commenced with reading the sutra that invokes the mountains and the waters, after that we prepared the objects that are offered in accordance with the qualities (*shinj chanar*) and particular likings of the masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*) and its protective Buddhist deity (*burhan*). Then the offering ceremony to the mountain (*uul tahih*) began by reading from the sutra.
- 35 The offering to Lhachin Bavuu *Ovoo*, similar to other *ovoo* offering rituals, commenced with an invocation and beckoning in which the masters of the land were called upon. The water and mountain spirits (*lus savdag/gazryn ezed*) to whom offerings are made at local *ovoo* offerings are basically thought to inhabit the land in the vicinity of the *ovoo*. However, they are also symbolically seen as incorporating or encompassing the area of the whole homeland. *Lus savdag* and *gazryn ezen* are hence generic terms for spiritual forces diffused throughout the land of the homeland in general. Along with the masters of the land, the Buddhist deity considered as guardian (*hargalzagch*)²⁶ of the *ovoo* was also called upon. The guardian deity offered to was Hangarid Burhan, a Buddhist deity that according to Banzai lama, was revered along with four powerful animals (*hüchtei tsereg*): the dragon, the tiger, the horse and the Garuda bird.
- 36 In the first part of the offering (*taij tahih*), the sutra belonging to Lhachin Bavuu *Ovoo*, which had been lost during the purges of the 1930s and re-located sometime after 1990, was recited in Tibetan aloud by Banzai lama. The offerings were presented to the deities and amplified through active textual beckoning by Banzai lama. To Lhachin Bavuu *Ovoo*, only white food (*tsagaan idee*) was offered. The white offering (*tsagaan tahil*), which at this

ovoo comprised the main offering, consisted of generous amounts of fermented mare's milk (*airag*), butter, soft cheese and dried cheese that had been brought along to the ovoo by the participants on plates, trays and in bowls. Before the offering event was about to commence, the women present had been busy arranging the foodstuffs in front of the ovoo on small stools that stood on a beautiful carpet laid out in front of the ovoo. The display of the white offering (*tsagaan tahlil*)²⁷ looked indeed inviting and appealing.

- 37 The offering of the food was then followed by a purification offering (*sang tahlil*) that was carried out by Banzai lama and two younger novices who swung incense-holders in all directions while Banzai lama recited from the purification (Mong. *sang*; Tib. *bsangs*) text. While reading the text, Banzai lama called upon the spirits by invoking place names of the homeland (*nutag*), and travelled through the land of their homeland orally²⁸. These were significant places of the land, especially ovoos and mountains of the homeland, that both encircled the administrative area of the district (*sum*), as well as those within its boundaries.
- 38 When the lama had finished reciting the text, drinks and food were served to everybody. The atmosphere was cheerful as people were drinking and eating. Yet the feasting did not last very long. Banzai lama stood up and everybody offered part of their food and drinks to the deities by sprinkling fermented mare's milk (*airag*) and tossing pieces of white food onto the ovoo. Afterwards, those people present prostrated themselves in an unordered fashion in front of the Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo. Banzai lama himself was busy preparing the final part of the offering ritual, the fortune-enhancing ritual called *dallaga*, which at this particular offering was carried out as a continuation of the purification offering. While Banzai lama concluded his recital, an old man started to give out rice and dried curds, passing them from his cupped hands to each one of the participants' cupped hands. People started to move their hands in circular motions clockwise, crying out "*hurai hurai hurai*" (*hurai* meaning "to gather/collect"). The intention of the *dallaga* was to collect and to contain blessings from the spirits that had been offered to, that is, blessings of fortune and prosperity (*buyan hishig*). One literally asked to receive in return for that which had been given, i.e. that which had been offered and the offering itself. Parts of the rice, curds and incense were kept by the participants and then brought home later and given to family and friends who were unable to come to the ovoo offering²⁹.
- 39 After the *dallaga*, the lid of the chest containing all the sutras was lifted off by Banzai lama and people started to gather in a line in front of the ovoo. Everyone was given one sutra each to carry with two hands, walked around the ovoo three times in a clockwise direction and then walked down the hill to the truck belonging to the district (*sum*) temple, where they were handed over to two young monks. The vehicle would later transport the sutras and relics to where the celebration took place. According to my host, Dambaa, this truck was also driven around the whole *nutag*, stopping at other ovoos and significant places in Tsenher Sum. Three days after the ovoo offering, the truck was again parked outside the temple in the *sum* centre, and everyone then brought the food and drink that was left over down to the steppe where the celebration *obooni naadam* (lit. ovoo's games) was to commence.

Photo 2. Women prostrating in front of Lhachin Bavuu



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- 40 As we came down the valley from Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo and got closer to the place where the *oboony naadam*³⁰ was to be held, about seventy horses with young boys and girls atop were getting ready to slowly ride to the starting point of the horse race further down the steppe, close to the springs beside the former monastery of Tsagaan Süm. All the cars coming from the *ovoo* offering parked in a semi-circle. Banzai lama and the two younger lamas pitched a small tent of clay-coloured cloth in the centre of the semi-circle and lifted the chest containing the sutras into this temporary shelter. Small wooden stools were placed in a semi-circle around a table in front of the tent. Cakes, sweets and cheese from the altar at Lhachin Bavuu Ovoo, along with two other bowls of curds and dried cheese, were laid out on this table. In front of the table was a low, narrow chest, on which the large bowl of *airag* stood.
- 41 Stalls were set up selling various fizzy drinks, biscuits and food. Some were even selling clothes, skin products, shampoo and various imported Chinese objects. When talking to Dambaa later, he told me that he personally, and other old people more generally, did not appreciate the changes that were taking place. The *naadam* celebration following an *ovoo* offering was meant to be a festive occasion of gaiety but rules did apply regarding appropriate behaviour. This also held for the three successive days after the conclusion of an offering where only white food should be eaten. Bad temper, drunkenness, abusive words, excessive display of wealth, or unsuitable clothing were discouraged, and excesses in terms of clothing and cars were looked upon by many as wrong or unfitting during an *ovoo* offering. In the aftermath of the national *ovoo* offering (*töriin tahilga*) to the sacred mountain Otgontenger, there was a heated discussion in the media about the display of wealth and the appearance of people attending, and thereby about the state of the

current *ovoos* offering ritual in general. One person even characterised the *ovoos* offering as a “fashion show”.

- 42 The offering to Lhachin Bavuu *Ovoos* and the following *ovoony naadam* can be seen as a context wherein a shared feeling of collectivity, as “one homeland people”, is emphasised. Sneath (1990, p. 314) has noted “that as a cultural means of expressing solidarity, unity and the position of group with respect to other groups, the *obo* ᠪᠣᠰᠢᠴᠢ ceremony is an excellent method.” The *ovoos* offering ritual as it appears in Mongolia today comes in a variety of shapes and content, and with different ritual aims. Nevertheless, the local *ovoos* offering, such as that performed to Lhachin Bavuu *Ovoos*, is clearly grounded in people’s wishes to influence their own wellbeing and in their ability to actually do so through the offering. In light of the challenges that herders face today, staging an *ovoos* offering is seen by many as necessary in order to avoid further imbalance in “nature” (*baigal*) – an imbalance that may cause calamities that can potentially make their lives as pastoral herders more severe. As the herder, Erdenebat, put it:

Our traditions and rules concerning our “nature” (*baigaliin yos*) are important – we do not cut trees except on auspicious days, we offer to dear mountains, we offer tea and milk every morning to the mountains, and we offer milk, tea and other things when we offer to *ovoos*. All this we do to save ourselves from winter calamities (*zud*).

Maintaining reciprocal relations

- 43 Doing an *ovoos* offering and pleasing the spirits with giving gifts and ritual attention was perceived as essential in bringing prosperity and fortune (*buyan hishig*) to their homeland and to themselves as one homeland people. My findings, however, point towards a current heightened sense of the immediacy and effectual elements in ritually asking for future prosperity and protection from evil and misfortune. For the herders, this is grounded in perceptions of their social and economical welfare, or rather lack of it, and what many see as a moral decay in Mongolian society.
- 44 The *ovoos* offering constitutes a moment when the “state of connectedness” (*holbootoi baidal*) in nature can be reflected upon and imbalances can be actively restored through establishing auspicious relations with the spirits in the homeland. These offerings encompass the conspicuous display of tangible objects, the recital of propitious words, ritualised fortune-enhancing acts, and a shared emphasis on creating a pleasurable (*bayasal*) moment. Collectively, they serve to underscore the desired effect that the offering is meant to have: of efficaciously receiving fortune and good will from the spirits of the land. As Sneath (1990, p. 313) has noted:
- The offerings [...] can be seen as a use of the symbolic logic to place spirits, and the natural forces they control, under an obligation to reciprocate and favour the worshippers. It symbolically draws the spiritual and natural worlds into the social system of reciprocal obligation.
- 45 People think doing an *ovoos* offering provides them with an opportunity to take concrete measures and to make a real effect on their welfare and prosperity. In this sense, establishing and maintaining good relations with the spirits through performing *ovoos* offerings involve, as Evens (2008, p. 188) has described, “a response not to theoretical but to practical questions, questions focused on the creative determination of ends rather than means.” With this in mind, I have suggested that the *doing* of ritual is privileged over the *understanding* of ritual, and follow Evens (*ibid.*, p. 188) when he further notes that

ritual is a “practise that aims to secure the very possibility of practise... in effect, ritual practice constitutes its own end.” When Halh herders make daily aspersions of freshly brewed tea to the deity of the sky (*tengger*) and the spirits of the land (*gazryn ezed*), or when they perform *ovoo* offerings, it is the fact that it is being done – that one acts upon one’s own ability and agency to influence future results – that is crucial. For herders I talked to, intervention from master(s) of the land and an understanding of the forces and abilities the spirits possess were simply a very real and pragmatic fact of their existence and not something that evoked metaphysical speculation *de facto*.

- 46 The effectiveness of the ritual proceedings is not subjugated to people’s understanding of the actual content of sutras and the specificities in the authoritative knowledge that the lama possesses. Rather, it is the perception that these texts, the authority of the lama as a religious specialist and the conclusion of ritual proceedings that together establish an affective relation with the spirits, the land and the places of the land. To be knowledgeable (*erdemtei*) is a highly regarded value among the herders and a Buddhist lama is *erdemtei*, due to knowledge attained through books (*nom*). His authority is neither questioned nor challenged. This, I believe, is also accentuated by the lack of contestation, discussion and disagreement about how *ovoo* offerings should be performed and the contents of the sutras recited. Thus, people accept this knowledge *as it is* (see Lindskog 2011). This is in contrast to the Telengits of the Altai (Halemba 2006), for example, who value flexibility and mobility in their relations to spirits; that is, they emphasise the potential that lies in being able to challenge and negotiate spiritual knowledge and understanding. I do not here seek to disqualify agency among the herders involved in an *ovoo* offering nor imply any “aloofness” either in how herders relate to and understand the spirits of the land or in the manner of their ritual proceedings. What I contend, however, is that it is precisely the active participation in making an offering (*tahih*) and the potential for producing concrete results, combined with the esteem and reverence held for Buddhist knowledge that make *the doing* of *ovoo* offering worthwhile and efficacious for people. As such, the *ovoo* offering is effectively reciprocal in kind, affective in content and effectual in outcome.

- 47 The herder Simjee offers a fitting conclusion:

We cannot put society’s interest (*niigmiin sonirhol*) above “nature” (*baigal*). Our Mongolian nomadic way of life rests on balance (*tentsver*). But now it is difficult to keep the balance because society is becoming more and more urbanised. If the state of imbalance continues as it is, we will have ecological calamities [...] so if we put our social interests above *baigal*, our *baigal* will be destroyed and our traditions will be lost. This is the big catastrophe. Everything must be on equal standing and that is why we must protect *baigal* and please *baigal* through *ovoo* offerings.

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NOTES

1. The population of west-central Mongolia are predominantly of Halh ethnic origin (*yastan*). Halh Mongols make up approximately 90 percent of the population of Mongolia.
2. *Ovooni tahlilga* means a "(ritual) offering" to an ovoos, while *ovooni tahlil* refers to the offering gifts that are offered to an ovoos and *ovoos tahlil* to the very act of making an offering to an ovoos.
3. Mongol Ündesnii Statistikin Gazar (Mongolian National Statistical Office) (2007) : *Population and Housing Census 2006*. This number has most likely changed drastically the past ten years due to the

harsh winter calamity (*dzud*) of 2010 where many herders lost most, if not all, of their livestock and were forced to migrate to the capital Ulaanbaatar or to the province centre Tsetserleg.

4. 45226 goats ; 51511 sheep ; 16578 cattle ; 13778 horses ; and 29 camels (Mongolian National Statistical Office : 2007).

5. Other transliterations used are those of *oboo*, *ovaa*, *obo*.

6. Bawden 1958 ; Tatár 1976 ; Gerasimova 1981 ; Chuluu and Stuart 1995 ; Birtalan 1998 ; Sneath 2007 ; Lindahl 2010 ; Davaa-Ochir 2008.

7. Sühbaatar 2001 ; Dambii 2006.

8. Sneath 1990, 1991, 2007, 2014 ; Humphrey, with Onon 1996 ; Evans & Humphrey 2003 ; Humphrey & Ujeed 2013 ; Pedersen 2003 ; Hürelbaatar 2006.

9. *Hangain delhi* – literally ‘the world of the mountain-steppe’ would often be invoked by the herders a source from which merit and prosperity could be asked for and hence as having a capacity to affect people and animals.

10. National ovoos (*ulsin ovoo*) may also be revered by and receive offerings from homeland people who live in the areas where they are located. Offering rituals to “worshipped mountains” gather people of high status and authority in Mongolia as well as thousands of Mongols from all over the country (Sneath 2014). In contrast to smaller ovoos offerings, these national offering rituals are directed towards the welfare and prosperity of the nation (*uls*) and the land of Mongolia. Presently Bogd Khan Uul, Altan Ovoos, Burhan Haldun, Otgontenger Uul, Khan Höhiin Uul, Sutai Hairhan, Altan Höhiin Uul and Suvraga Hairhan have been decreed sacred by Mongolia’s government (*cf.* Davaa-Ochir 2008).

11. State sponsored ovoos offerings or other offerings on a grander scale, as they are carried out today, are not explicitly apotropaic events though parts of the ritual procedures performed by the high-ranking lamas are aimed at purification of negative energies, to ward off misfortune and to create auspiciousness for the nation and its people at large.

12. It is estimated that around 30 000 lamas were executed during these “Stalinistic” purges during communist leader Choibalsan’s reign in Mongolia, a parallel to what was happening in the Soviet Union at the same time.

13. According to Baabar (1999, p. 370) in 1934 there were 771 temples and monasteries in Mongolia. By 1938, only 11 remained, the others having been completely destroyed.

14. While all ovoos of significance were systematically razed down, many smaller types of ovoos persisted, especially in remote parts of Mongolia, and ovoos offerings were carried out secretly on both individual and collective levels (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 12).

15. ‘Tengger’ encompasses several meanings : its literal meaning being “the sky” and “weather” *Tengger* was often used by the herders with reference to it being a ‘deity’ such as Höh Mönh Tengger (‘the Blue Eternal Sky’) or *nutgiin tengger* (homeland deity(ies)/spirit(s)).

16. Various terms are used : *Galın Eh* ; *Golomt Eh* ; *Odhan Galaihan*. The spirit of the fire, similar to the spirits of the land, goes under several names and in certain rituals the maternal or feminine aspects of the deity are substituted or added to by a paternal/male deity. See Heissig (1980) and Atwood (1996) for details on these themes and critical discussions.

17. See Lindskog (2011) for a more comprehensive analysis of political and religious aspects related to ovoos and how they tie in with the concept of *nutag* (“homeland”) and changing administrative borders from the late Manchu-Qing period (1644-1911 C.E.), throughout the communist era and up to the present.

18. During the past two decades, the herders of Mongolia have been gravely affected by *dzud* ; in 1993, 1999, 2002 and in 2010. The *dzud* of 2010 had severe consequences for the herders in the district of Tsenher, forcing people to take up huge loans in order to regenerate their stock of animals or forcing them to give up their lives as herders and migrate to the peri-urban *ger*-districts in the capital Ulaanbaatar, many of them ending up in abject poverty.

19. See, for example, Banzarov (1981-1982) and Bawden (1958) on analyses of texts by Mergen Diyanchi Lama ; Sneath (2007) for a comparative analysis between this text and what he refers to as “The 1649-91 text” (“Rites and so on for the establishment of an obo”); Humphrey and Ujeed (2013) and Evans and Humphrey (2003) for a comparative analysis of the processes of Buddhicisation of the land, the symbolic and structural complex of *ovoos* in the environs of Mergen Monastery in north-central China and the Mergen Diyanchi text.

20. One such text was written by Biciyeci Corji Agvandorj in 1893, by decree of the Jetsundamaba Khutugtu (see Tatár 1976 ; Bawden 1970).

21. See Lindskog 2011, pp. 279-281 for more discussion on these issues.

22. Unfortunately I was not able to retrieve any detailed information on how the offerings to this particular *ovoo* were carried out before the 1930s, other than that the present ritual procedures were said to be in line with how they had been carried out in the past.

23. The explanation given to me by various people was that to Lhachin Bavuu *Ovoo* only white offerings (*tsagaan tahlil*) were offered and thus women were allowed to participate. This in contrast to *ovoo* offering rituals where red food offerings consisting of meat (*ulaan tahlil*) or black food offerings consisting of alcohol (*har tahlil*) are offered. In pre-communist times few, if any, women were allowed to participate in *ovoo* offerings according to several older herders I talked to. In general women are excluded from participating in *ovoo* offerings to higher mountains. Women can also be excluded at these and other *ovoos* on grounds of the deities’ acceptance of women in the offering (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p 127) or on the grounds that certain mountains are conceived as powerful and may “endanger women’s fertility” (*ibid.*, p. 127). See also Huber (1994) for comparison with Tibet.

24. See Lindskog (2011) for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the concept of “*nutag*”, territorial boundaries and *ovoos*.

25. *Zan üil* means ritual procedure or act (carried out in a proper/correct way).

26. Similar to Mongolia, these Buddhist protective deities often appear in Tibetan cultural areas as protectors of major sacred mountains. In central parts of Tibet, however, they are not invoked when offerings are made to protective spirits (Tib. *yul lha*) of particular localities, such as a valley surrounding a village (Heidi Fjeld, personal communication).

27. Offerings made to *ovoos* in Mongolia can be characterised as follows : *zooglohyn tahlil* – general food offerings, such as dairy products, butter lamps, pure water, sweets and incense ; *ongolohyn tahlil* – food offerings consistent with the character and likings of the *ovoo* spirits. These are either a red offering (*ulaan tahlil*) consisting of meat, white offering (*tsagaan tahlil*) with milk products, or black offering (*har tahlil*) of alcohol ; *ariusgahyn tahlil* or *sang tahlil* – the purification offerings, consisting of offerings of fumes from certain herbs and plants. Silk and barley mixed with butter can also be burned as offerings. See Davaa-Ochir 2008, pp. 110-111 for details of different types of offerings.

28. During the purification offering, Buddhist cosmic localities (Bawden 1958 ; Tatár 1976) are included, sometimes not. There are various texts devoted particularly to purification through fumigation. Yet those most commonly used by lamas in Mongolia during larger *ovoo* rituals are “The incense offering to cause rainfall of auspiciousness” (*Bsang mchod bkra shis char ’bebs*) (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 117) and “Incense offering for the water divinities” (*Klu’i bsangs*) (Lindahl 2010, p. 246).

29. These shares of offerings are called *ovooni hishig* (“blessed gifts/fortune of the *ovoo*”) (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 111). Placed in a small pouch (*dallagni ut*) kept in a chest in the respected part of the home (*hoimor*) where the altar is situated, they contribute to symbolically harnessing the future prosperity of the family (Empson 2007, p. 2011).

30. *Naadam*, or “The Three Manly Games” (Eriin gurvan naadam), includes horse-racing, archery and wrestling. Staged *ovoo* offerings are always followed by an *ovoony naadam*, though many of the smaller local offerings do not include archery. *Naadam* is a celebratory event where virtues

such as physical strength, precision and horsemanship are exhibited, and praised. Significantly, the *naadam* and the foregoing offering form together an event that celebrates collectivity and nurtures feelings of shared Mongolness that, according to the herders I conversed with about this issue, please the masters of the land. The happiness and positive energy such an event creates, serve to enhance the potential for auspiciousness and future prosperity.

ABSTRACTS

After the collapse of communism in 1990 Mongolia has experienced an extensive revival of religion and religious practices. This article focuses on the “revised editions” of local ovoos offerings-ritual offerings to the deities of the land-among nomadic herders in the central province of Arhangai. Through a focus on the ritual and social processes involved in ovoos offerings, the article explores the interrelatedness between collectivity, understandings of “nature” (*baigal*) and notions of belonging.

Après l’effondrement du communisme en 1990, la Mongolie a connu un renouveau important de la religion et des pratiques religieuses. Cet article se focalise sur les « éditions révisées » du culte local de ovoos-offrandes rituelles aux divinités locales - chez les éleveurs nomades dans la province centrale Arhangai. En mettant l’accent sur le rituel et les processus sociaux impliqués dans le culte de ovoos, l’article explore les corrélations entre la collectivité, les compréhensions de la « nature » (*baigal*) et les notions d’appartenance.

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AUTHOR

BENEDIKTE V. LINDSKOG

Benedikte V. Lindskog is currently an associate professor and researcher at the Section for Medical Anthropology and Medical History at the Institute of Health and Society, University of Oslo. Her work is grounded in longitudinal research among nomadic herders in Mongolia, focusing on social and ritual organisation, notions of homeland and belonging, and perceptions and relations to land and nature. Her more recent work is concerned with the health system of Mongolia, exploring the relationship between health system reforms, rural-to-urban migration, socio-economic conditions and winter calamities.

b.v.lindskog@medisin.uio.no