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# SACRED MOUNTAINS IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN NATION: THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF LANDSCAPE IN MONGOLIA[1]

> "On Qaldun-burqan, my life was like that of a swallow. I was protected." "I was greatly afraid. Every morning I shall sacrifice to Burqan-qaldun, and every day I will pray to it. The seed of my seed shall know this," he said (*The Secret History of the Mongols*, 2001, p. 84).

These words were supposedly spoken by Temüjin, known to the world as Genghis Khan. In the Mongolian national discourse, Burkhan Khaldun is the cradle of the Mongol nation and is inseparably connected with the figure of the leader: here he was born, here he established the Mongol empire, and here in the immediate vicinity – it is also assumed – he died[2]. Probably for this reason, the first president of Mongolia, Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat, issued a decree "Supporting Initiatives Aimed at Restoring the Tradition of the Cult of the Bogd Khan Khairkhan, Burkhan Khaldun and Otgontenger mountains" (no. 110, on May 16, 1995). On the basis of the decree, state ceremonies are held periodically at the foot of the mountains, in their honor. The president thus initiated the institutionalization of the cult of mountains and the phenomenon of authorities granting the status of "national mountain" to individual peaks[3]. On April 23, 2004, the above act was amended by a new presidential decree (no. 57) and since then the legal basis for holding official ceremonies has been "On the rules of holding the state ceremony of venerating *tenger* mountains and *ovoos*"[4]. There are currently 10 state-recognized sacred mountains in Mongolia, each with the status of a special protected area: Bogd Khan Khairkhan, Burkhan Khaldun, Otgontenger, Altan Khökhii, Darigangyn Altan Ovoo, Khan Khökhii, Sutai Khairkhan, Suvrag

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[1] I would like to thank Agnieszka Halemba for reading the first version of this article and for all her comments.

[2] *Great Burkhan Khaldun Mountain and its surrounding sacred landscape (Mongolia), No 1440*, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1440/, accessed 09.12.2019.

[3] The genesis of the phenomenon can be found in the 1910s. After Mongolia achieved independence in 1911, the theocratic ruler of the country, the Bogd Gegeen, established the practice of granting the khans of *aimags* the privilege of making offerings to ensure the success of individual administrative units. After coming under the patronage of the state leader, the *aimag* ceremonies were transformed into national offerings. – I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this fact.

[4] I refer to all legal acts and ethnographic sources in translation from Mongolian by Oyungerel Tangad, whom I wish to thank for her help.

Khairkhan, Altai Tavan Bogd, and Gobi Gurvan Saikhan[5]. In 2010, the Mongolian Post Office even issued a series of stamps commemorating these mountains.

In this article I analyze the relationship between the "sacred" mountains and the process of building national identity in Mongolia in the context of the political transformation. I present contemporary practices related to mass *takhilga* offerings intended for the guardian spirits of the most important summits in Mongolia, which have national status. I look at how the local ontology, which is based on the relational interaction of human and non-human entities, is reflected at the level of state activity. In discussing the issue, I refer to the category of landscape and show how it has become an important actor contributing to the contemporary national discourse of the Mongolian state.

Honoring mountain ranges is not unique to Mongolia. "Sacred" mountains are important places in the identity geography of many societies in vast areas of Asia. They play an important role not only for individuals and communities but also in political discourses. For example, Kangchenjunga in the Himalayas, the third highest mountain in the world, is an object of worship and the addressee of numerous rituals. It is also a powerful driving force in creating the identity of the multi-ethnic residents of Sikkim. Not only is the mountain a national symbol from the period before India absorbed the independent kingdom but today it also unifies different levels of Buddhist and pre-Buddhist ritual practices (*bön*) of the local Lhopo community (Balikci 2002, pp. 5–6). Mt. Kailash, which is located on the Tibetan Plateau in the Trans-Himalayas on the border of India and China, is a special place for the followers of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism. For the followers of Hinduism, Mt. Kailash is the embodiment of Mt. Meru and the seat of the god Shiva (Urbańska-Szymoszyn 2012, pp. 85–86), for Tibetans – and especially refugees in India – it is embodies the identity aspirations related to the independence of Tibet. The difficult relations between China and India have severely limited the possibility of participation in pilgrimages to the foot of Mt. Kailash and of walking around it in the direction of the sun, which is an important way of establishing a personal relation with the mountain. The highest peak of the Russian Altai, Mt. Belukha, located in southern Siberia within the borders of the Russian Federation, is also worthy of mention. In the local terminology it is called Üch Sumer, which brings to mind Buddhist and Hindu cosmology. The summit is an important point of reference for the identity of the Altai people and is commonly equated with the seat of the Altai's "spirit," *Altaidin eezi*. It is a metonymy – it can be an all-encompassing whole and a part at the same time: the world, a country, and a place; it is a powerful force that can simultaneously take on a material appearance and appear to people in an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic form (Halemba 2005, p. 167; 2006, p. 64; Smyrski 2018, p. 245). What connects the above examples is people's belief that mountains are not only physical entities but also non-material causative forces.

People's relations with mountains and landscape spirits (the guardian spirits of mountains, passes, rivers, springs, and lakes) are not static or defined once and for all. Rather, they derive from contemporary phenomena in the world. Accordingly, they are

[5] https://sacredland.org/mongolias-ten-sacred-mountains/, accessed 09.04.2020.

also politicized – as are ritual public offerings. In Buryatia, which neighbors Mongolia and where Soviet modernization processes have significantly changed people's relations with the land and mountains over the years, one current public ceremony is the *tailga* offering performed by shamans in Ulan Ude. The essence of the ceremony is to honor the spirits of the place and gain their favorable regard for the inhabitants of the capital. In pre-socialist Buryatia, the *tailga* was territorial and ancestral. However, many modern Buryats living in the city are unacquainted with their ancestral affiliation. Therefore, in order to maintain the "traditional" character of the rituals performed, the shamans have designed new rites and recreated lost lineages. As a consequence, new public ceremonies have arisen. When making an offering, they summon the family spirits of a given place not on behalf of a given family but of a "new" territorial group: the inhabitants of the capital. Interestingly, the ceremony's participants include not only Buryats but also Russians. Innovation has produced "traditional" rites to create a new kind of community that transcends ethnic boundaries (Buck Quijada 2008, pp. 2–3).

It is worth noting that many of these performative celebrations are held outside the city limits. The offering takes place in an open-air museum on the outskirts of the city. The most important national holidays in the republics of southern Siberia are also celebrated in open, non-urbanized spaces. I believe that the landscape in such cases is not only a picturesque setting for the ceremony but also an important social actor in which the past materializes and reveals the power of nature, which is often present in identity discourses in post-socialist Asia. An example is the festival of El-Oin ("folk games") in the Altai Republic, which was proclaimed in 1991. The festival is held every four years in remote areas of the mountain republic, each time in a different administrative region (Smyrski 2008, pp. 68–77). It is a mobile holiday, wandering around the country (in the ideological vision of the republic, the Altaians were presented in the 1990s as nomads leading a nomadic lifestyle) and strengthening the position of political authorities among the inhabitants of remote provinces. The participation of the president and other state dignitaries in the ceremonies, which are held each time in a different geographical part of the mountain country, is intended to enhance the sense of there being a national community of citizens of the new republic and to further collective identification regardless of ancestral origin, language differences, or place of residence[6].

## THE STATE, THE LANDSCAPE, AND THE INVENTED TRADITION

The preamble to the decree "On the principles of holding the state ceremony of honoring mountain *tengers* and *ovoos*" contains the information that the honoring of mountains and *ovoos* is an important aspect of Mongolian tradition:

[6] In the Altai Republic there is a division between the northern Altaians, the Altai-kizhi group, and the Telengits. Members of each of these communities are predominant in individual administrative regions of the republic. The differences between them concern their dialects, religions (burkhanism, ak-tia, Altai jan), and local identification.

> The *tailga* and *takhilga* ceremonies played an enormous role in regard to understanding the care and protection of the Mother – nature. They taught that nature is to be treated like a human being. The message they contained served to preserve the territories, to strengthen the feeling of patriotism and nationalism. Therefore, it is worth continuing the tradition of our ancestors, these traditions of state customs, passed down and cultivated from generation to generation, while simultaneously adapting them to the present day (*Altan Chöchii uul* 2009, p. 8).

The authors of the decree point to the importance of these types of offerings for Mongol society, ascribing to them a significant role in shaping national identity. The association of the *takhilga* with patriotism and nationalism gives a new dimension to sacrificial rites. The ceremonies, which have always had local specificities related to a given territory, are referred to in the legal act as the "tradition of national customs." The legislators wrote of continuing the tradition of "our ancestors," which seems to suggest that such ceremonies have been held continuously for a long time. They also postulate adjusting their character to the present day, which in practice provides room for great inventiveness in rearranging old traditions, and even inventing them from scratch, while maintaining the impression of historical continuity.

The establishment of a state *takhilga* offering, sanctioned by appropriate documents and public ceremonies of honoring the mountains, combined with a historical narrative often invoking Genghis Khan, corresponds to the process described by Eric Hobsbawm as an invented tradition. It arises in conditions where "a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable" (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 4). During the socialist period in Mongolia, ceremonies of public worship were banned, as were practices involving shamans or Tibetan Buddhist clergy. With the change of regime and the introduction of the democratic system in the early 1990s, the offerings made to the mountain guardian spirits at *ovoos* were revived and became a widely visible part of the social landscape. In the following years, some of the offerings acquired a previously unknown institutional dimension. The state ceremonies held at the foot of mountains in various parts of the country are attended by the president, members of the government and parliament, local authorities, an honor brigade in fancy uniforms styled after those of thirteenth-century warriors, and masters of Tibetan Buddhism. The celebration is organized on the basis of a script setting forth the rules for collective offerings to the mountain by the state authorities. The presence of state insignia and the national archery master's shooting an arrow as a sign of prosperity for Mongolia emphasize the event's importance. The phenomenon is interesting in that while the ceremony of honoring the mountains was formerly of local character the organizer is now the national government, which, with the help of the mass media, disseminates the phenomenon and gives it a supra-local character.

In the context of the politicization of human relations with mountains in Mongolia, analogies can be found in the ceremonies of offerings to individual mountains at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1913, one of the commanders of the Mongol troops, before a battle with the Chinese, asked a shaman to perform a ritual

to maintain the fighting spirit of the Mongol soldiers. During the ritual, the shaman summoned the spirit of Bogdo Khan's[7] state, thanks to which the fighters received powerful support allowing them to defeat the militarily stronger enemy (Purev, Purvee 2006, p. 38). Sometimes the ceremonies were performed simultaneously by shamans and Tibetan Buddhist monks. For example, a lama and a shaman made a joint offering to Mt. Azagbash on the occasion of the Mongols' liberation from the Manchu occupation and the proclamation of the independence of the Mongol state in the summer of 1912 (Purev, Purvee 2006, p. 56).

In the political context, however, the cultural significance of the Buddhist *ecumene* should be emphasized first of all – the areas extending from the Himalayas, including Ladakh, Sikkim, and Bhutan, to Baikal, including Tibet, Amdo, Qinghai, Gansu, Inner and Outer Mongolia, Buryatia, and Tuva provinces, which constitute the setting for public rituals in Mongolia (Atwood 2011; Sneath 2014; Wallace 2011). Tibetan Buddhism's important role in the amalgamation of religion, power, and landscape can be seen at various times throughout history. In Mongolia's history, strong Buddhist influences have always been associated with the restoration of centralized power (the reign of Kublai Khan in the fourteenth century, the period of Khalkh statehood at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the consolidation of the Manchu empire in Mongolia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). Especially in the Manchu period, Buddhism expanded into the entire steppe area (Humphrey 1995, p. 140). It was then that the religion was consolidated with the sacralized geography promoted by the rulers. Buddhist rituals celebrated at *ovoos* (stone mounds) made use of earlier shamanic rituals, formalizing them, *inter alia*, as sacrificial prayers spoken on the tops of the highest mountains or in other holy places and addressed to the spirits of earth and water. The revival of Buddhism and the alliance of the religion with the state authorities can also be seen in recent years, after Mongolia regained political sovereignty and with the change of the political system.

The relationship of landscape with power and religion is an interesting, though not obvious, field for reflection on the construction of nationalism within the borders of the nation state. Caroline Humphrey, in analyzing the shepherding practices of nomads, introduces a conceptual division of Mongolia's landscape into chief-related and shamanic. These differ in the ways they capture the energies inherent in nature and the scope of social activities related to people's use of these forces. The first type of landscape is associated with the person of the chief, the second with the figure of the shaman. Both leaders and shamans have powers that result from the construction of various social forms of mediation between humans and the forces of nature. Leadership mediation is derived from male lineages. The chiefs and clan leaders of ancient Mongolia were successful only when they could effectively oppose the forces

[7] The Bogd Khan, or Bogd Gegeen, the first ruler of the state after it obtained independence in 1911 and simultaneously the leader of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia. His death in 1924 coincided with the start of the Mongolian People's Republic and a period of revolutionary change, with political and religious repression.

of nature and ensure health, prosperity, and sufficiently large herds for their subordinates. Shamans, in turn, accumulated the energies inherent in the world and used them in the rites they conducted (Humphrey 1995, pp. 138–139).

In my opinion, the above distinction can be applied to contemporary political activities that correspond to chieftainship relations with the landscape. I perceive the state's current practice of holding ceremonies on sacred mountains – with the attendance of representatives of the highest state authorities and high dignitaries of Tibetan Buddhism from the Gandan monastery in Ulaanbaatar, as part of state ritual – in terms of the chief-related landscape. In the practical dimension, the relation is constituted by collective offerings, rituals, and invocations codified by appropriate documents and addressed to the mountains/spirits/heaven with requests for prosperity and for the gracious acceptance of gifts. The aim is to ensure the success of the state. The idea of a leader indubitably encompasses the office of the president; the president's role as a social leader and authority is crucial here.

Although the position of leaders in old Mongolia was largely legitimated by their patrilineal ancestors, belonging to a lineage was not enough to become a leader. A person's leadership skills and responsibility for other people were important. Obviously, no one becomes president of Mongolia by being born to a specific line of ancestors, but in my opinion, the actions of the state are aimed at creating a sense of history in which political power is a natural continuum of the former Mongol state. And it seems to be successful: Genghis Khan has become a national hero over the last 25 years and is an important part of the process of building an imagined national community within the territorial borders of modern Mongolia (Myadar 2017).

In the period leading up to the People's Revolution, the idea of a pre-modern Mongol nation (pan-Mongolism) encompassed certain ancestral and territorial groups which are now within the boundaries of other states, namely, the Buryats from the Republic of Buryatia in the Russian Federation and the Mongols from the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia in China (Bulag 1998, p. 2). Although manifestations of the formation of Mongol national identity in the Western sense can be traced to as early as the end of the nineteenth century, it was only the emergence of the socialist state that created favorable conditions for the formation of a unifying identity based on the modern idea of nationhood (Kaplonski 1998, p. 35). Until then, the construct defined as the Mongol nation involved a narrow group of people referred to in Western terms as the aristocracy (family leaders and local administration) or in terms of the people's revolution as the feudal owners of large herds of cattle. In the twentieth century, the aristocratic, class profile of domination was replaced by a new ideology of equality which laid the foundation for the emergence of the Mongol nation in the modern sense. After the establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924 and the introduction of the socialist regime, the historiography of the new state had to find an ideological solution to justify the fact that more than half of the people who before the revolution had been considered to be fellow Mongols remained outside the state's borders. This was done by creating a new historical narrative in which the community of Khalkha Mongols, around whom the representation of the modern

Mongol nation was created, began to play a central role (Bulag 1998, pp. 70–80; Sneath 2010, p. 251). Nationalist discourse – in line with the practice of many Marxist states that defined victorious revolutions in national terms (Anderson 1991, pp. 1–3) – created a national history confined within the borders of the state, in which it was essential to show the historical process. This vision of historical continuity became the basis for modern Mongolian nationality (Sneath 2010, p. 252). It is significant that it did not apply to those members of the Pan-Mongolian community who found themselves within the borders of other countries: Russia and China, although they belonged to the so-called cultural community.

The territory of modern Mongolia, which corresponds to the borders of the Mongolian People's Republic and is inhabited in the vast majority by the Khalkha community, became a model for creating national history during the socialist era and also after the political transformation of the 1990s, which introduced a democratic system and market economy. The ideological involvement of the state[8] consisted in creating an idealized representation of the nation (Myadar, Rae 2014). Contemporary references to the past during the construction of a unifying collective identity correspond to modernization practices in the formation of modern nationalisms within the borders of nation states (see Hobsbawm 1983; Smith 2009). This is a part of a wider phenomenon in the post-socialist states of Central Asia, where societies need new forms of performing collective identities and, as a consequence, create new traditions (Hofmann 2010, p. 132). The process is also underway in Mongolia, where, after abandoning communist ideology, political leaders have constructed a new kind of national identity based on the idea of a community of origin (Genghis Khan) and also on local forms of communication with non-human entities.

## *OVOOS* AND *TAKHILGA* CEREMONIES

"*Ovoo*" in Mongolian means a "pile," or a "heap." In a physical sense, it is a mound of stones or a pile of branches. Most often it is located at the foot of peaks, on ridges, or on mountain slopes. Many *ovoos* are made on passes, along roads, and also near holy springs, lakes, or rivers where water spirits (in Mongolian, *lus*) reside. They can also be found near solitary or oddly shaped trees, on a single rock, near a monastery or in other venerable places (Lindskog 2016, p. 3). They constitute the material form of the seats of the landscape spirits living in the immediate vicinity. In passing an *ovoo*, one should put three stones on it and walk around it three times in the direction of the sun (Evans, Humphrey 2003, p. 196; Humphrey, Onon 1996, p. 146; Pedersen 2011, p. 135; Smyrski 2018, pp. 265–266).

[8] In this article I do not analyze the separate status of the Kazakh minority in the national policy of the Mongolian state. Certain practices indicate that the Kazakhs have been included in the project of constructing a modern Mongol nation. In the national discourse, their nomadic past and common heritage from Genghis Khan is emphasized, as in President Elbegdorj's speech in which he called them "respected members of the nomadic civilization" (Kopf 2017).

Ceremonies at *ovoos* are usually performed by lamas, especially in areas where Tibetan Buddhism has gained a dominant position (Halemba 2006, pp. 169–170; Humphrey 1995, p. 148; Lindskog 2016; Mongush 1992, p. 82). These are public offerings within administrative units (prayer assemblies at the *sum* or *aimag* level). They can also be made by shamans on behalf of individuals, families, or neighborhood communities with the intention of gaining the favor of the spirits of the landscape and ensuring the prosperity of the local residents. *Ovoo* rituals express respect for the spirits of the place, who rule the neighborhood (Zhukovskaia 1977, pp. 35–37); the rituals serve to stabilize the life of the local community and maintain relations with the local land and homeland. They are attended by representatives of small territorial groups and individual clans, which extend along the male line (Halemba 2006, pp. 168–169; Humphrey 1995, pp. 143–144). Earlier *ovoo* ceremonies were associated with the ancestral structure (Tangad 2013, p. 94) and kinship within the lineage. Annual rituals and collective offerings at *ovoos* were made by men from a given family or territory (Pedersen 2011, p. 135). Similar practices appeared in Mongolia after the fall of socialism. The *takhilga* offerings acquired even higher rank due to state ceremonies at *ovoos* at the foot of sacred mountains, attended by representatives of the highest state authorities.

In modern Mongolia, the scope of *ovoo* rituals could be expanded due to their "nationalization." Mongolian anthropologist Bilegsaikhan Tamirjavyn points out that modern Mongols distinguish between an "*ovoo* with state offerings" (*töriin takhilgatai ovoo*) and an "*ovoo* with local offerings" (*oron nutgiin takhilgatai ovoo*). Currently, there are ten sacred mountains within the territory of the whole country, with *ovoos* worshiped at the national level under the auspices of the president, and several hundred mounds venerated by the local population (Tamirjavyn 2017, p. 262).

The *nutag* ("homeland," "little homeland") plays a huge role in the lives of the inhabitants of Mongolia (Rakowski 2019, pp. 184–192; Smyrski 2018, p. 284 et seq.). According to Christopher Kaplonski, this concept contains the essence of Mongolian identity: an emotional connection with the place of birth or inhabited territory (e.g., nomadic routes, valleys, or administrative units: *aimags* or *sums*). In a broader sense, *nutag* can go beyond a specific space and be identified with the whole of Mongolia. This is especially true of people who are abroad and call their homeland a Mongolian *nutag* (Kaplonski 2004, p. 19). A *nutag* is also the area of influence of local guardian spirits, and offerings performed by lamas or shamans at an *ovoo* establish relationships between human and non-human entities. In this way, the spirits of the place (*gadzryn edzen*) participate in the life of the local community. After the political transformations in Mongolia, public *ovoo* ceremonies became socially important events and contributed to strengthening of solidarity among the people of one *nutag* (Lindskog 2016), as manifested not only through participation in collective offerings but also in the practice of migrating within a specific space, worshiping the same *ovoo*, and having the sense of being a community of people born in a given territory.

Collective ritual offerings performed at *ovoo* in mountain passes or under the peaks of sacred mountains are called *takhilga*. As a rule, they are organized in late

spring or early summer to obtain favorable weather conditions (rain to prevent drought, good grass, mild winters) and to keep the herds happy. Such holidays are usually accompanied by archery competitions, wrestling, and horse races. They are meant to amuse the local inhabitants and give pleasure to the surrounding nature (Kabzińska-Stawarz 1994, pp. 201–202). Through offerings made at *ovoo*, the inhabitants of the *nutag* establish a positive relationship with the spirits of the landscape. *Takhilga* are also political in meaning: people who perform a public ritual on behalf of a group most often exercise some kind of power and represent the local community in contacts with non-human entities (Sneath 2007, p. 137)[9]. In the past, they were mainly family leaders and heads of territorial and administrative units, today they are either heads of shepherd brigades[10] or voivodes.

Especially when performed by Tibetan Buddhist monks, *takhilga* ceremonies can be interpreted as religious activities related to belief in the existence of landscape spirits. However, it would seem that people's relationships with non-human entities are not a matter of faith but of social practice. The goals of these celebrations are pragmatic, and the guardian spirits are partners in certain social activities rather than objects of worship (Lindquist 2008, p. 117). From this perspective, state offerings are not religious events celebrating the mountains, skies, and landscape spirits but measures aimed at strengthening the national identity based on identification with the entire territory of the state. It is about shifting the emphasis from the level of strong local identification (*nutag*) to the construction of a state community, regardless of the place of origin. State *takhilga* are political acts in which mountains are important actors that affect the power relations.

Mongolia's territory is scattered with sacred mountains. Some are located on a provincial border, which often coincides with the border of a *nutag*. The state manifests its existence and strengthens its political power over distant territories by performing spectacular rituals in mountain landscape controlled by local guardian spirits. In this performative activity (as we shall see in a moment), it is easy to discern a combination of power, history, and landscape in which the past, present, and future merge.

## ALTAN KHÖKHII

Below I present an example of the state ceremony of offerings at Altan Khökhii in the Khovd region of Altai, which in 2005 was recognized by the Mongolian authorities as a national mountain and included in the list of the most important peaks in the country. The celebration of the holiday is strictly codified in law. In Presidential Decree No. 44, "On the granting of the status of a mountain with national *takhilga* to Altan Khökhii," we read that:

[9] For more on the subject of *takhilga* offerings, see Smyrski 2018, p. 349 et seq.

[10] In spite of changes in the organization of work caused by the systemic transformation, in the western aimags of Mongolia descriptions typical of a collective economy are still widely encountered (for instance, "shepherd brigades").

> Considering the initiative of the local community to continue this tradition and to organize ceremonies in accord with the canon of national ceremonies, and considering the decision and request of the local government, under paragraph 34, point 1 of the Constitution, I order: 1. Make Altan Khökhii a mountain with national *takhilga*, in order to venerate the *tengers* of this mountain once every four years [...] 3. Let the ceremony be conducted in accord with the canon of customs of our ancestors, in accord with our historical tradition [...] (Altan Khökhii *uul* 2009, p. 6).

By decree, the president introduces top-down rules governing the performance of the offerings, in reference to the constitution and a vaguely defined ancestral tradition. An annex to another decree clearly sets forth the rules for state ceremonies. The performers of the ceremony in this case are the members of the regional council of Khovd, who are responsible for the full organization of the holiday. As can be seen in the above regulation, the ceremony is standardized, and the state – in the person of the president – is the dominant power that determines the order of the ceremony. This is in contrast to the customary forms of human-mountain relationship, where both human and non-human subjects are on the same level of communication. The mountain, which for the local residents is a causative subject, protector, and life[11] companion, in the case of the centralizing formula becomes a passive object of worship, not a non-human partner in action. And although it has its own unique character distinguishing it from other peaks (for the inhabitants of the entire *sum* it is certainly unique and most important), it has been tamed by a legal, unifying discourse. Thanks to state ennoblement, it has become one of the most important mountains in Mongolia, but at the same time one of the ten where rituals are performed according to a precise scenario prepared by representatives of state structures. In the program of the state ceremony honoring Altan Khökhii, even the performance of the national anthem is planned down to the minute (Altan Khökhii *uul* 2009, p. 18).

Altan Khökhii rises on territory inhabited by the Mingghads, members of a separate group from the Mongols of Khalkha, who are part of the historic Oirats. The literal translation of their ethnonym from the Mongolian language means "thousand." Knowledge of a mid-eighteenth century migration from the vicinity of Lake Hubsugul is common among the local people. During the time of the Manchu dynasty's rule and of land conflicts, the Chinese emperor was supposed to have agreed to grant land to the Mingghads if they could produce a division with 1,000 soldiers. Since their prince's power did not encompass so many men, the women covered their faces, tied knives to their sides, disguised themselves as men, and came to the rescue. The trick was successful and the land was obtained. Hence the name of the whole group comes from the Mongolian word "*mangan*" (a thousand). According to scientific research, this community currently numbers about 5,000 people, and indeed in the mid-eighteenth century their ancestors came from the areas of the modern Mongolian-Tuvian border (Atwood 2004, p. 357). Since then, the lands east of the Khovd River have been considered to be their pastoral territories, and the Altan Khökhii has become the mountain they consider "their own" and which they honor.

[11] On the basis of ethnographic research conducted with Tangad Danaadżaw, Oyungerel Tangad, and Karolina Szmigielska in Myangad Sum and in Ulaanbataar in August 2009 and 2010.

Altan Khökhii, like other "sacred" mountains in Mongolia, has its guardian spirit (Mongolian *edzen*, *lus sawdag*). It manifests itself to people in various anthropomorphic forms. The common opinion is that the *edzen* of the mountain is a woman in a pretty green *deeli*, riding a gray horse (Mongolian *bor mor*), although I have heard another version, where the spirit is a man on a black horse. Just as the guardian spirit materializes to its people in various physical forms, the mountain itself eludes homogeneous terminology and has several names: Altan Khökhii (which is also the national name), Altai Khökhii, and perhaps most commonly, Öndur Khökhii. When asked about this, one of the interviewees said that the "real", official name that appears in books is Altan Khökhii, but the locals call it Öndur Khökhii out of respect: for example, "I was born at the feet of Öndur Khökhii, in Bajanbulag and I worship Öndur Khökhii, but basically there is no difference, as I say. [...] Altan Khökhii is more of an extension of the Altai. Öndur Khökhii is a name of *hundetgesen* – of respect, like 'sir'."

The mountain does indeed enjoy great respect among the inhabitants and is generally considered to be strong. People claim that it is their protector and the owner of their herds. They honor it: they do not climb to its top or hunt on its slopes; they behave quietly and calmly so as not to anger the guardian spirit. According to popular belief, the mountain not only looks after the shepherds who live at its feet but also after everyone who has left the *nutag*. Mingghads living in Ulaanbaatar, 1,500 kilometers away, sprinkle their morning tea for it, keep it in their minds, and look at it every day thanks to photos on their walls. The mountain remembers such people and wishes them well. One of the Mingghad interviewees from the capital said that he misses his birthplace and that he goes there every year, strips naked, and rolls on the ground. Thanks to this, he is healthy and does not fall ill. Another interviewee, who had been unwell, had been advised by a lama after visiting a Buddhist monastery to go to her birthplace to recover. The mountain cares about people, worries about them, and waits for those who have left the *nutag* to return some day (Smyrski 2018, pp. 301–302).

Mingghads unequivocally identify with this particular mountain. Interestingly, it is supposed not to like "strangers." This view corresponds with older sources from before the introduction of socialism in Mongolia. We learn from them that Altan Khökhii did not like when representatives of foreign (non-Mingghad) families participated in the rites of offering (Lhagvasuren 2012, p. 33). So the question arises as to how to regard its having been granted the status of a national mountain, with the result that from being a place of local importance it has become a kind of national resource? Does organizing large state celebrations disturb the *edzen*'s peace and anger it? Have representatives of the local community not felt the consequences of disturbing their personal and intimate relations with the mountain?

My description of the state *takhilga* ritual performed for Altan Khökhii in 2009 is based on the account by David Sneath (2014). On July 6, shortly after dawn, about 60 male dignitaries, policemen, lamas, musicians, an honor brigade, military officers, and about a hundred spectators (men) waited near the summit for the president to arrive and conduct the ceremony as head of state. During this time, the lamas laid out the sacred texts on low tables and began chanting prayers in Tibetan. There was

also a military orchestra and a band of musicians with folk instruments, dressed in national costumes, waiting to participate in the upcoming ceremony. After the helicopters had landed, President Elbegdordj, assisted by MPs, bodyguards, and senior military officers, took the place of honor at the *ovoo*. In a truly montane scenery, the soldiers of the honor guard, dressed in red and blue uniforms styled after those of Genghis Khan's warriors, moved towards the *ovoo*, carrying the state insignia – *bunchuks* (horse-tail banners), containing the vital and protective forces of the Mongolian state, and Buddhist *thangki*[12]. The first to march was a soldier carrying the national flag, followed by a guardsman with the black *bunchuk* of the army, then the flags of the provinces of Khovd and Uvs were raised (because the mountain is near the border of these administrative units). These were followed by seven more soldiers carrying images of *burchans* (Buddhist deities), whom the rituals were to propitiate (Sneath 2014, pp. 459–460). In the case of this particular ceremony, the *bunchuks* deserve special attention. As Oyungerel Tangad writes:

> Genghis Khan's *bunchuks* play a unique role and occupy a special – perhaps the most important – place in the hierarchy of community symbols, as they belonged to the most revered ancestor. [...] A white *bunchuk* was intended for state ceremonies in times of peace, during which the collective life force of the state was honored. Currently, it stands in the parliamentary building and is exhibited during important state ceremonies. [...] There was also a black *bunchuk* used during the war, because it contained the life force of the army, and it is now a symbol of the Mongolian armed forces (Tangad 2013, pp. 18–20).

The white *bunchuk* is a state prop created in the 1990s; it was designed as a replica of the regalia of Genghis Khan's empire. Made of white horsehair with a golden helm crowning the whole, it is publicly displayed at important state events, such as the annual Naadam festival in Ulaanbaatar or during the ceremony of honoring the national mountains. During war, the white *bunchuk* was replaced with the army's black *bunchuk*. Since the rituals performed at Altan Khökhii were intended for "wild [aggressive] deities," it was considered necessary to have this symbol, thus giving the event a specifically military character. Therefore, the black *bunchuk*, accompanied by senior military officers, made the long journey from the Ministry of Defense in the country's capital to Khovd Province in western Mongolia.

Ultimately, the president made a speech in which he declared that the revival of the *tenger* (heaven) cult with the help of "pure and ancient *ovoo* mountain ceremonies" is one of the greatest achievements of the democratic Mongol state. He emphasized the importance of the said ceremony for the cultivation of Mongolian tradition, history, the nation, and the environment during the last twenty-five years. The event was coordinated by a famous TV presenter from the capital, the master of ceremonies, who told the participants how to behave, when to proceed three times around the *ovoo* clockwise, when to bow, and when with open, raised palms, to make circular movements, chanting the ritual words "*khurai*, *khurai*, *khurai*" (gather, gather, gather – in the sense of accumulating merits or values). The culmination of this phase of the

[12] Pictures with religious content.

ceremony was the appearance of a silk-beribboned white horse as a *seter* – an animal dedicated to the deity of the mountain (Sneath 2014, pp. 459–460).

It is worth noting that the ceremony, as described, was dominated by state symbolism. The real purpose of such events seems to be the presence of the president. The state's domination in the *takhilga* ceremony (about which Tangad writes that the state's life force is revived during it) is evidenced by the fact that a white bunchuk – symbol of the Mongolian state – is placed in the center of the *ovoo*, higher than the fluttering Buddhist prayer flags. Strong references to the medieval past are also visible in the rituals of honoring the national mountain. The ideological sense of the celebration unequivocally fits the concept of an invented tradition in which the state creates a set of activities of a ritual nature, which are repeated in order to suggest continuity and thus create a bond with a past era (Hobsbawm 1983, p. 1).

The participants from Ulaanbaatar, as well as representatives of the local administration and officials, were certainly satisfied with the ceremony. However, I think that not all the local shepherds shared their optimism. One of the interviewees, in giving his impressions of the ceremony, confided that he thought the *edzen* of the mountain would be disturbed by the hubbub and the cars. Some people openly expressed the fear that they could personally suffer the consequences of this celebration. They feared the anger of the Altan Khökhii guardian spirit, whose peace had been violated. Undoubtedly, the event was important from the perspective of the national capital, as another element of the nation-building process legitimizing the central government in the country's distant territories. However, the shepherds were not at all convinced that the local spirits had accepted the offering made by so many outsiders – members of another *nutag* (local homeland).

We might wonder whether the guardian spirit was present at all during the state ceremony. I suspect the sounds of helicopters landing at the foot of the mountain and the roar of latest model Asian jeeps did not encourage the *edzen* to participate. A rhetorical question could be asked: is this not a situation where people – in referring to the constitution and other legal acts – placed themselves above the laws of nature (mong. *baigal*) and conducted ceremonies on their own terms, contrary to the local cosmology and the accepted principles of communication between humans and non-humans? And although this view was not voiced loudly at the foot of Altan Khökhii, perhaps the answer of the mountain spirit to this question was an exceptionally harsh winter in Altai, as a result of which many cattle died and the herd owners lost their financial base.

## CONCLUSION

Public ceremonies of honoring individual mountains, with the participation of the highest state authorities, are an example of the political use of the landscape for the purpose of building modern Mongolian nationalism. The above examples show how contemporary processes related to the building of the nation state significantly

interfere with local cosmologies. I have shown how, in the context of the global flow of ideas, the power of the guardian spirits of the mountains has undergone significant transformations. In the Mongolian case, the landscape spirits still own the mountains, but more and more often, in the situation of world transfers of ideology, they are becoming part of a national project of constructing a collective identity. *Ovoo* mountain ceremonies are an important part of state rituals that have been developed and implemented as part of a project to construct a national identity for the people of Mongolia. This has become possible thanks to the practice – which is not discernible at first glance – of finding traditions that give the impression of being durable and eternal. Uniforms and props designed specifically for this type of event, including presidential regalia, ceremonial guards, and white and black *bunchuks*, are intended to indicate the clear continuity of the Mongolian state and the prolongation of the traditions of the medieval empire. Like other state rituals, the *takhilga* ceremonies held at the foot of sacred mountains are intensely nationalist. They are directed at the Mongolian nation and are designed to evoke a strong sense of separate heritage and identity (Sneath 2014, p. 460). The presidential decree speaks explicitly about "strengthening the sense of patriotism" and "continuing the traditions of our ancestors."

At the same time, the landscape is an important actor with a driving force in this process. I believe that collective state offerings in specific mountain areas far from urban centers can be treated as an attempt to negotiate the success of the whole country with non-human entities. Rites that are local in nature acquire a national dimension. *Takhilga* celebrations are not a thanksgiving practice of honoring individual mountains but an activity with a specific goal: to ensure the prosperity of the state and the people living within its territory, as is best shown by the act of shooting an arrow from the national bow, while the national archery master cries "Long live Mongolia!" The desire is to ensure conditions of prosperity and success, in which the landscape is not only the backdrop but also an important actor in the construction of a collective national identity in Mongolia.

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SACRED MOUNTAINS IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN NATION:
THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF LANDSCAPE IN MONGOLIA

**Keywords**: Mongolia, Altai, sacred mountains, *tachilga,* ceremonies, invented tradition, landscape

The aim of the article is to analyze the relationship between the landscape and the process of building national identity in Mongolia in the context of political transformation. I describe contemporary practices related to the public *tachilga* offering intended for the guardians of the most important mountains with national status in Mongolia. I consider how the local ontology based on the relational interaction between human and non-human entities is reflected at the level of state activities. Discussing the issue, I refer to the category of landscape and show how it has become a major actor in contemporary national discourse in Mongolia.

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