

PART VII

Worship of Spirits in the Darkhat Valley, Northwest Mongolia

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Fig. 1 Consecrated horse belonging to lead guide Sanjim with a seter attached to its un-cut mane. The seter is a bundle of colored cloth ribbons that holds a spirit. This horse is called Ongon Be, Tuvan for mare. July 2005

Mongolian nomadic culture provides the appearance of continuity over thousands of miles and thousands of years. Ancient bronze-age inhabitants and modern Mongolians have at least a three thousand-year heritage of herding stock and pasture-use, hunting of forest animals, and use of sacred sites and practices. Ancient inhabitants constructed grand and lasting monuments such as Bronze Age khirigsuurs and deer stones and Turkic-era stone men ('balbal') and inscribed stones. Modern Mongolians, and their Asian, Central Asian, and Siberian relatives, have the ubiquitous *ovoo* – piles of stones or teepees of poles and sticks that are found on mountain passes, road crests, and difficult river crossings and headwa-

ters, honoring the spirit-masters of these places. These modern monuments change and grow with every passer-by who adds stones, sticks, and objects to the monument and performs the ritual of circling the *ovoo* three times in a clock-wise direction to ask for luck in his or her travel. However, it is not clear whether most modern Mongolians consider these *ovoo* rituals as tradition and superstition, or actual spirit worship.

There are other monuments, more important and sometimes more ephemeral, that are actively worshiped to this day. These honor spirits known as *ongons* and the sacred objects, also called *ongons*, where they reside. *Ongon* is applied equally to the "untouched" and uncut mane at the withers of all Mongolian ponies; to the bundles of cloth ribbons known as *seters* (Figure 1), stuffed cloth, or carved wood, bone or stone figures that hold spirits; to the fenced *asars* for the worship of dead shaman (Purev 2003); and to each community's shared sacred and ceremonial sites. Even some of the Bronze Age deer stones and Turkic stone men currently are venerated as *ongons* as is evidenced by their decoration with Buddhist prayer cloths, hadags, or anointment with yellow ointments, and by the remains of burned incense and animal scarifies at their base, all of which we have seen in recent years at the Ulaan Tolgoi (Erkhel) deer stone site (N49°55.922' E 099°48.227').

However, rather than continuity, these nomadic cultures actually represent cross-currents that intermix many cultures and different spiritual traditions and worship practices. In our recent years traveling in Hovsgol Aimag's Darkhat Valley and its surrounding Ulaan Taiga, the Deer Stone Proj-

ect's Botany Team has visited and documented a number of *ongons* and *ovoos*. These sacred objects and sites mix together folk religious practices and worship of fire, sky, earth, and water with Asian ancestor-worship, shamanism, and Buddhism. Heavenly deities and underworld spirits preside alongside numerous Buddhist gods in the three-world cosmology shared by modern Mongolian and their close neighbors, the Tuvans. One interesting remnant of the different religious traditions is a practical separation of worship functions. Individuals petition the disinterested heavenly deities; clan elders conduct ancestor worship ceremonies; and lamas guide Buddhist worship – but only the Shaman or Lama-Shaman negotiate, wrestle, and trick the underworld spirits. The Darkhat Valley's sacred objects and sites represent three separate but intertwining worship traditions in current practice – Lamist Buddhism, Darkhat Shamanism, and Dukha Shamanism.

Worship of Spirit-Masters of Places

Ovoos and outdoor *ongons* constructed of locally available stones, sticks, or trees allow communication with and offerings to the spirit-masters of places – mountains, forest, passes, rivers, and lakes. As Pegg (2001: 97-100) notes, Mongolians are “dwarfed by an inhospitable landscape” and must placate “truculent” master-spirits to ensure fertility, health, and wealth. These spirit-masters controlling all of the factors most important in herding represent an ancient folk tradition that has been incorporated into both Shamanism and Buddhism. The spirit-masters and their *ovoos*, *ongons*, and ceremonies are the domain of the clan and the clan elders, with a secondary role for their shaman and Buddhist lamas (Pedersen, undated). Any Darkhat, Dukha, or Mongolian traveling the Darkhat Valley is free to worship at its many *ovoos* and community *ongons*, and this worship is the most common observed by travelers in the region.

The Darkhat Valley, as the former Buddhist ecclesiastical estate Darkhat (or Dhakhad) Ih Shav' under the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, is home to a number of Buddhist-influenced Darkhat *ovoos*. They are characterized by multicolored prayer scarves traditionally of Chinese silk (but now often of synthetic fabric), printed prayer flags with standard messages, wooden, seed, or stone prayer beads, and plaques with Tibetan script. The most important ceremonial sites, Öliin Davaa ('bald pass') at the southern entrance of the Darkhat Valley (N50°34.647' E 099°08.581') (Figure 2), Ongon Hill in Renchinlumbe Sum (N51°22.548' E 099°34.988') (Figure 3), and the sacred Renchinlumbe Mountain (N51°32.575' E 099°12.270') (Figure 4), each have thirteen *ovoos* or altars – twelve small *ovoos* or altars in a row with one large *ovoo* at the south end. The *ovoos* are constructed of standing sticks in a teepee form. The number of *ovoos* and offerings is part of the “Cult of Thirteen Altai Mountains of West Mongolia” (see explanation in Pegg 2001: 108-112, 304), a ritual number adopted by Buddhism as representing sacred Buddhist mountains.

Öliin Davaa and Ongon Hill are used annually for festivals and Naadams (the Mongolian festivals with horse raising, archery, and wrestling), and for ritual milk offerings before the fall



Fig. 2 Dukha guides in front of the large *ovoo* showing Lamist Buddhist and Darkhat Shamanist influences at Öliin Davaa ('bald pass'), the southern entrance of the Darkhat Valley. July 2007

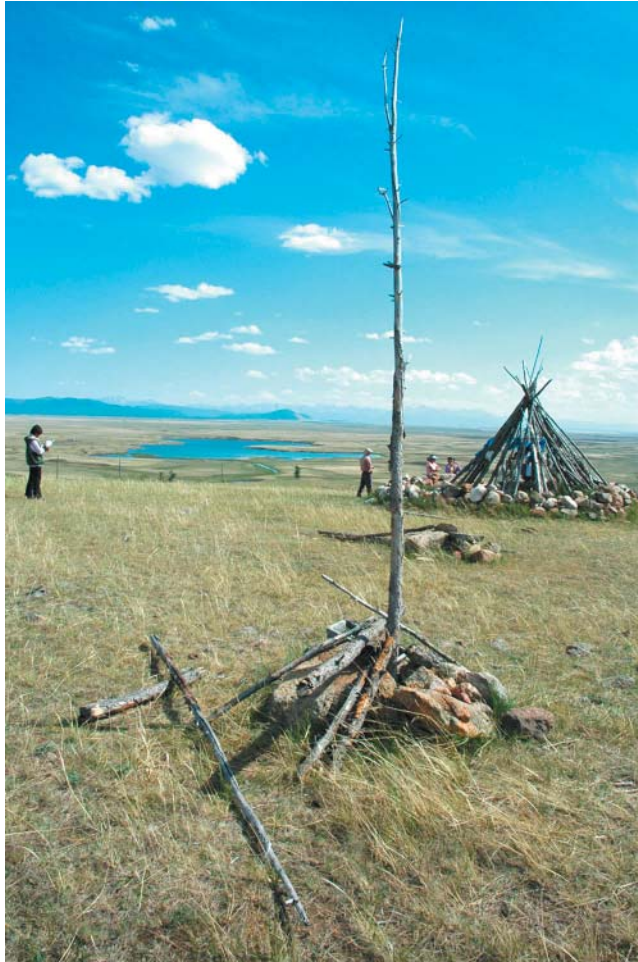


Fig. 3 Two of the twelve small ovoo altars, with the large ovoo in the background, showing Lamist Buddhist and Darkhat Shamanist influences at Ongon Hill in Renchinlumbe Sum. June 2005

migration (see Pedersen, no date: 21-23, for description of the Öliin Davaa festival). Renchinlumbe Mountain was used for reading of Buddhist sacred texts before Buddhism's suppression by the Communist government beginning in the 1930s. Buddhism has greatly influenced the ethnic Darkhats and their Shamanism, so their sacred sites are often shared with the Buddhists and decorated in a similar manner. In addition the Darkhats have "Shaman Trees," large, lone trees often marked as sacred by being struck by lightning. One Darkhat shaman tree in the Kharmai Valley (N51°20.451' E 099°14.693') is a lone pine tree decorated with blue and white prayer hadags on its lower branches (Figure 5). The related ethnic Buryats place the ashes of cremated shamans in deep holes cut into similar shaman trees (Humphrey 1983).

The Dukha represent a separate but related ethnic group maintaining a Tuvan primary language and shamanic practices that have to a lesser extent been influenced by Buddhism. The Dukha are traditionally reindeer-herders who also hunt and gather, in contrast to the Darkhats, who traditionally herd domestic sheep, goats, and cows. In contrast to the Buddhist and Darkhat traditions, Dukha (also called Tsaatan – meaning reindeer people in Mongolian) outdoor worship

sites are not obvious and focus on natural elements and use of natural materials such as "Russian cotton" fabric that readily decomposes. In June 2007 the Botany Team visited one Dukha *ovoo* which is treated as a sacred site by our Dukha guides (Figure 6) – we were not permitted to collect any of the plants observed around the site. The site was located on a rock outcrop on the highest point of a ridge above the Kharmai River west of Tsaagannur Sum, the same ridgeline with a Darkhat shaman tree and a Buddhist *ovoo* (N51°20.451' E 099°14.693'). Kharmai is known as the valley of the "fathers" or ancestors for its numerous ongons and shaman burial *asars* (see map in Purev 2003: 316, as "Harmay"). The Dukha *ovoo* consisted of two groups of three sticks each anchored with piles of rock on the top of a flat outcrop. The sticks were between 1 and 1.5 meters long; only one stick had branches.

The first activity of the Dukha guides when we arrived at the site was cleaning and repositioning the sticks that had fallen. Our Dukha guide Khalzan, a Dukha shaman, prepared ritual milk and cheese offerings, incense of *artz* (*Juniperus*) and other aromatic herbs, and, with the help of other guides, tore strips off of a meter-wide piece of white Russian cotton cloth. The guides offered milk to the heavens with a *tsatsal* — a traditional wooden spoon with nine small sockets representing the nine heavens that was ornamented with bundles of multicolored ribbons or seters — and called the names of numerous places, mountains, and rivers as they made one clockwise turn. When



Fig. 4 Deer Stone Project Botany Team with Dukha guides holding plaques with Tibetan script from the Lamist Buddhist ovoos on the sacred Renchinlhumbe Mountain in Renchinlbe Sum. July 2006

asked, lead guide Sanjim, the father of Khalzan, reported that he called the names of Tuvan places the country where he was born, in addition to places in the Darkhat Valley and Ulaan Taiga. The guides tied multiple 5cm-wide cotton strips to each of the sticks and placed small pieces of cheese around the altars. As a final ritual they, in turn, blew on incense burning on the altars to create a cleansing smoke. The ceremony, led and directed by the clan elder Sanjim, appealed to the spirit master of Kharmai for protection and provided instruction to the younger guides and family members on proper worship.

Worship of the Spirit-Masters of Animals

In addition to protection of the clan, Dukha and Darkhat shamanists use *ovoos* to ask for luck in hunting. Hunting represents an exchange with the spirit-masters of animals. A hunter or hunting group must win the permission of the spirit-master to take wild game. For the ethnic groups of the Darkhat Valley, along with their Siberian relatives, the interaction between the hunter and the spirit-master is seen as charming or seducing, and embodies all of the intimate and romantic qualities of human romance and marriage (see Willerslev 2007). Hamayon (2006) suggests that Siberian hunting cultures are of necessity shamanistic, with the exchange mediated between a male shaman and a female animal spirit-master convincing her to give up her animals. While we have not been privy to the shamanist negotiations, we have observed special worship by male Dukha hunters at one of the few active hunting *ovoos* in the mountains above the Darkhat Valley, the Sailag Davaa hunting *ovoo*.

In June-July 2005 and July 2007, our group visited the hunting *ovoo* at Sailag Davaa (N51°06.702' E 098°08.961') (Figure 7), over two days by horse from the closest reindeer camp or settlement. According to the Dukha guides, the hunting *ovoo* became important during Mongolian



Fig. 5 Darkhat shaman tree above the Kharmai Valley that is decorated with blue and white prayer hadags on its lower branches. June 2007

independence in 1911 when, under increasing Russian influence, the local groups paid tribute in sable hunted or trapped in the pass. To meet this tribute, large groups of hunters camped in the pass in the winter months, the hunting *artels* described by Vainstein (1980:174). This pass is the eastern entrance to the Bussingol Depression, since the late 1950s an uninhabited border region that is the primary hunting and antler-gathering ground for both the Dukha and the Darkhats. The *ovoo*, standing on a small hill in the center of the pass, is constructed of around 2.0-1.5 meter sticks anchored in a pile of rocks. The sticks are tied with as many as 300 strips of fabric in multiple colors; an estimated 80% of the strips are white Russian cotton, 10% blue, 5% yellow, and the remainder green, red, brown, pink, purple, and printed multicolor.

Attached to the sticks are over 60 carved *ongons*, almost all of wood. Half of these represent hunting equipment – knives (14), rifles that can be identified to make (10), spikes (2), bullets for particular rifle models (2), a club, and a crossbow arrow. The remainder include wild animals – rabbits (2), and bear, bird, deer, lynx, marmot, and squirrel; domestic animals – horses (5) and camel; commemorative plaques (13, including 10 that were produced during the July 2007 visit); and various items – skis (2), an airplane, a flour-mixer, and a vodka bottle. Actual objects include bullets (10), vodka bottles (3), ibex antlers (1 complete pair, 1 single antler), cigarette lighter (1), and numerous matches and match boxes. Interestingly, this *ovoo* has no horse or animal skulls, although they are common on *ovoos* throughout the Darkhat Valley. The *ovoo* has two altars of flat rocks that are in current use for burning incense (documented in June 2005) and offerings of cheese and candy (June 2005, Figure 8, and July 2007). Milk offerings are made to the surrounding mountains and rivers and to animate the *ongons* and antlers on the *ovoo*. As with tools attached to Dukha and Darkhat shaman garments, the small weapons and animals serve as amulets as the hunter negotiates with the animal spirit master for good hunting. Animal figures are used to ask for exchange for actual animals, and to serve as repositories (*ongons*) for holding the spirits released from his earlier catches.

The released spirits are then ready for rebirth under the control of their spirit-master.



Fig. 6 Dukha Shamanist *ovoo* above the Kharmai Valley that the Dukha guides are decorating with strips of white Russian cotton fabric. June 2007

Worship of Ancestors

The most important *ongons* are family objects that contain spirits and human souls, often of deceased shamans and other relatives. As discussed by Banzarov as early as 1891 (summarized in English in Znamenski 2003), such *ongons* for ancestor worship may have originated from widespread Asian ancestor worship. Rychkov in 1922 (in Znamenski 2003) suggested that these souls are considered dangerous as they may try to take their family, and especially the children, to the underworld to create a parallel life. Additionally, Hamayon (2006) noted that in Turkic cultures such as the Tuvan Dukha where souls are reused (reincarnated), the souls of relatives who die without progeny and therefore are without the potential for being reincarnated in descendants may take over a living body by displacing its soul. Providing a figure or image (Smoliak 1991) to hold the souls, feeding them with milk or fat, keeping them in a



Fig. 7 Dukha and Darkhat Shamanist hunting ovoo with carved images of weapons and animals at Sailag Davaa, with a rainbow. Rainbows are considered both *ongons* and good omens for these ethnic groups. June 2007

secure place in the home (*ortz* or *ger*) and honoring them has the goal of appeasing and taming the spirits and holding them in a safe place. In Buddhist and Darkhat homes the family will have an altar with special candles, ancestor or family photographs, and Buddhist tankas, visible to all. In contrast, Dukha shamanists keep their altars, including photographs of deceased family members, covered and their family *ongons* are enclosed in a pouch they hang from the roof poles of their tents. The *ongons* are produced and animated by shaman and, if the family has enough wealth to set aside animals permanently from routine work or slaughter, are transported during migrations on consecrated

domestic animals, horses, reindeers, sheep, goats, or cows (Vainstein 1996).

In June 2007 we were allowed to view a display of the *ongons* belonging to guide and shaman Khalzan and his family (Figure 9). Khalzan reported that the *ongon* was very old, belonging to the Soyon clan of his mother, Chuluu, the wife of lead guide Sanjim. Chuluu's family has generations of shamans, and both her mother and father, Khalzan's grandmother and grandfather, were shamans. His grandfather's photograph in his shaman costume is displayed in the Mongolian National Museum. This clan is originally from the area near Mongolia's Ulaan Taiga and the bordering region of Tuva near Lake Tere-Khol. The *ongon*, actually five *ongons* attached to a single cloth, was presented to Khalzan along with other shaman paraphernalia from his ancestors. When he is older, at forty, he will have an additional seven *ongons* from his father's, Sanjim's, Baglash clan. The Baglash is from the Bei Khem area of northeastern Tuva.

The *ongon*, displayed at the north side of the *ortz* teepee was framed with numerous Buddhist hadags mainly in blue, but also a few in gold. The *ongon* was a pieced cloth, green above and white below with a blue strip between them, on which five small anthropomorphic figures were placed. The figures were dressed in high-necked blue *dels* with matching blue trousers and a contrasting yellow sash, all appearing to be constructed of wool felt. The feet, hands, and heads were



Fig. 8 Dukha guide, Bayaara, makes an offering of cheese and burned incense at the hunting ovoo at Sailag Davaa. June 2005

puffs of long, dark fur that may be bear or sable. At the feet of each figure were seter-like stacks of fabric strips (ca. 5 cm wide) that were white, with green, blue, and yellow strips below. Along the side of the *ongon* panel and on its ties hung bundles of fabric strips that are white, blue, yellow, green, and even a few prints of green and white. Bundles of dark horse hair were attached to some of the white fabric strips.

A number of other ritual items were displayed with the *ongons*. To the right of the *ongon*, a shaman's ritual walking stick with three branches at top was tucked under an *ortz* pole. With it was a grayed and crinkled cloth – apparently originally white – that must be its wrapping. Further to the right of the *ongons* were bundles of fur that may be a ritual bear paws and Khalzan's shaman drum and paraphernalia. Above the *ongons* was an embroidered image of a reindeer stitched in dark reddish brown thread on a white cloth edged in green. Ritual reins – white fabric covered in black, white, or red strips – may indicate the presence a second walking stick to the left of the *ongon*. Groups of fabric braids in white, green, and blue are ritual snakes. An old wooden pipe was displayed in front of the *ongon*. Offerings in front of the *ongon* included artz, cheese, cookies, candies, milk tea, candles of yellow oil, bricks of tea, and folded white Russian cotton cloth. The entire *ongon* display was splattered with milk, and during the viewing Khalzan used a *Tsatsal* to splatter the *ongon* with milk saying that he heard a raven, which is considered to be a shaman's messenger.

The *ongon* is consistent with a special type of Tuvan ancestor *ongon* (in Tuvan *eeren* or *eren*), *Emegelchin eeren* illustrated in Kenin-Lopsan (1997: plate 3) and described, as *emegel'chi eeren* by Vainstein (1996: 173) for protecting women during childbirth, and the family's home and possessions. Other types of contemporary family *ongon* have been described or photographed by Pedersen (undated: 9) and Sadar (2004), respectively. Although Vainstein (1996: 173) discusses the figures as representing 1) an ancestral female shaman, 2) the woman requesting the *ongon*, and 3) the woman's children, none of the five figures seem to have a drum or other ritual items indicating a shaman or to be smaller in size, representing children. Possessing and worshiping an *Emegelchin eeren* is consistent with the family's stated concern with protecting their children. When Khalzan was asked why there were so many shamans in his Soyon clan, he answered that they were needed to protect their children. With this *ongon* the family is honoring the souls of their ancestor who domesticated their reindeer, asking for the ancestor's protection from hostile spirits, and with shamanic magic keeping them from either steal or replacing the souls of the family members. Such *ongons* are produced by shamans and are used in their healing ceremonies.

To this day *ovoo* and *ongon* worship is active in the Darkhat Valley of northern Mongolia. In these sacred sites and with these sacred objects, the Dukha and Darkhats venerate the spirit-masters of specific places and of hunted animals, and most importantly their own ancestors. They lure spirits to reside in the objects to appease them into providing protection and good fortune and to act as their



Fig. 9 Dukha Shamanist Emegelchin eeren for ancestor worship with five anthropomorphic figures, belonging to guide and shaman Khalzan and his family. June 2007

special helpers in their day-to-day activities. Although these worship practices represent, and incorporate, different worship traditions — Lamist Buddhism, Darkhat Shamanism, and Dukha Shamanism — they share many common and ancient beliefs in the transport of souls between the earthly world, the heavens, and the under world, and the control of the earthly world by spirit-masters.

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