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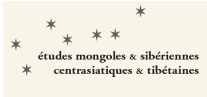
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Points of Transition. Owoo and the Ritual Remaking of  
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# Community, faith and politics. The ovoos of the Shinehen Buryats throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century

*Communauté, croyance et politique. Les ovoos des Bouriates de Shinehen au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*

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## Introduction

- 1 The Buryats are a transborder people who live in three states – Russia, Mongolia and China – where they constitute minorities<sup>1</sup>. In the People’s Republic of China, they number around eight thousand people scattered over the Shinehen area<sup>2</sup> in the Evenki Autonomous Banner (Ch. Ewenke zizhiqi 鄂温克自治旗) of the Hulun Buir municipality (Mo. Hölön Buir hota; Hulunbei’er shi 呼伦贝尔市)<sup>3</sup>, where they settled from Russia after the October Revolution.
- 2 Situated on the Russo-Mongolian border in the north-eastern corner of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Hulun Buir is also home to various Tungus and Mongol groups officially labelled as “ethnic minority groups” (Ch. shaoshu minzu 少数民族<sup>4</sup>). The south-western steppe areas of the region provide these different groups (Solon, Khamnigan, Daur, and Barga) with pastures for their livestock. Despite the decline of the pastures over the last two decades, many Buryats are still engaged in pastoralism, as are their Tungus and Mongol neighbours. The Buryats do not constitute a separate entity in the Chinese ethnic classification system because they were merged into the “Mongol ethnic group” (Ch. Menggu zu 蒙古族), a group of almost six million people, in the 1950s. The Buryats are nonetheless recognized locally as a distinct, identifiable community by the Han Chinese, the other Mongols and Tungus groups and the local authorities. Ask anyone in the steppe and urban areas of Hulun Buir about the Buryats, and he or she will immediately mention the Buryats’ distinct clothing, herding

techniques, tasty food<sup>5</sup>, numerous lamas and ovoos rituals. However, the recognition of the Buryats as an identifiable community is not only related to such distinctive features, promoted today as “ethnic cultural heritage” by the Chinese authorities. The identification and later recognition of the Buryats on Chinese territory was a tumultuous political process. It started in the early 1920s, when the Buryats constructed their own ovoos after being allotted pasturelands and a banner by the local administrative office (Ch. *yamen* 衙门)<sup>6</sup> of Hulun Buir. Gradually, following waves of migration into Hulun Buir, the Buryats erected several ovoos cairns that reflected both their new territorial administrative groupings and political allegiance to the Hulun Buir authorities.

- 3 The present paper explores the relationship between the construction of ovoos cairns and the political recognition of the Buryats throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considering the ovoos cairn as a support for local and oral history, I will show how previous and contemporary ovoos construction and worship may link territory, politics and identity in Inner Mongolia’s most multi-ethnic area. The ovoos cairn was not only a territorial marker that connected a group of people to its collective territory and legitimized the use of pastureland. It was also an essential symbolic monument for the recognition of the Buryats as legitimate citizens of Hulun Buir.
- 4 In order to understand this double process of appropriation and recognition, I have combined ethnographic research with written sources. I first met Buryats in the winter of 2010 when I was on the way to conduct fieldwork among the Solon people, a Tungus group. This fortunate encounter was the beginning of new fieldwork research among the Shinehen Buryat community conducted during multiple visits between 2010 and 2019. I did not prioritize any locality or social group to the detriment of another. Instead, I followed my informants in their everyday life, going from the urban centre of Hailar (the capital city of Hulun Buir) to the *gachaa*<sup>7</sup>, attending diverse festivities and interviewing various people from the Buryat community: lamas, herders and employees of the Shinehen local government.
- 5 I was taken for the first time to Buryat ovoos rituals in the summer of 2011. Ovoos rituals are believed to be auspicious occasions for gathering and highlight for the Buryats the importance of worshipping their territorial deities. As well as attending several Buryat ovoos rituals each year, I have also participated in a dozen ovoos rituals among the Solon, Daur and Barga peoples. Each community maintains a privileged relationship with its cairn, as it is considered to host powerful spirits. By attending rituals, I have also learned that behind every ovoos, there is always a story to tell. The numerous oral histories demonstrate how people feel they belong to a territory. Therefore, I took oral histories connected to ovoos as the starting point of this research, hoping to better understand the Buryat sense of belonging to Hulun Buir. As the anthropologist Micaela Di Leonardo has pointed out, ethnographic oral history may give historical value to narrated life experiences (Di Leonardo 1987, p. 4). These oral stories are based on people’s memory about their own experience and second-hand histories told by elders and others within the community. I was thus interested in recording the construction of a historical past shared by the whole Buryat community. Alongside oral histories recounted by different people from the Buryat community, I have also used available written local materials. Like narratives, these sources, and especially Buryat chronicles, are necessarily biased. Indeed, they tend to present an official version of the Buryat migration validated by the Chinese state. Although they are not necessarily based on

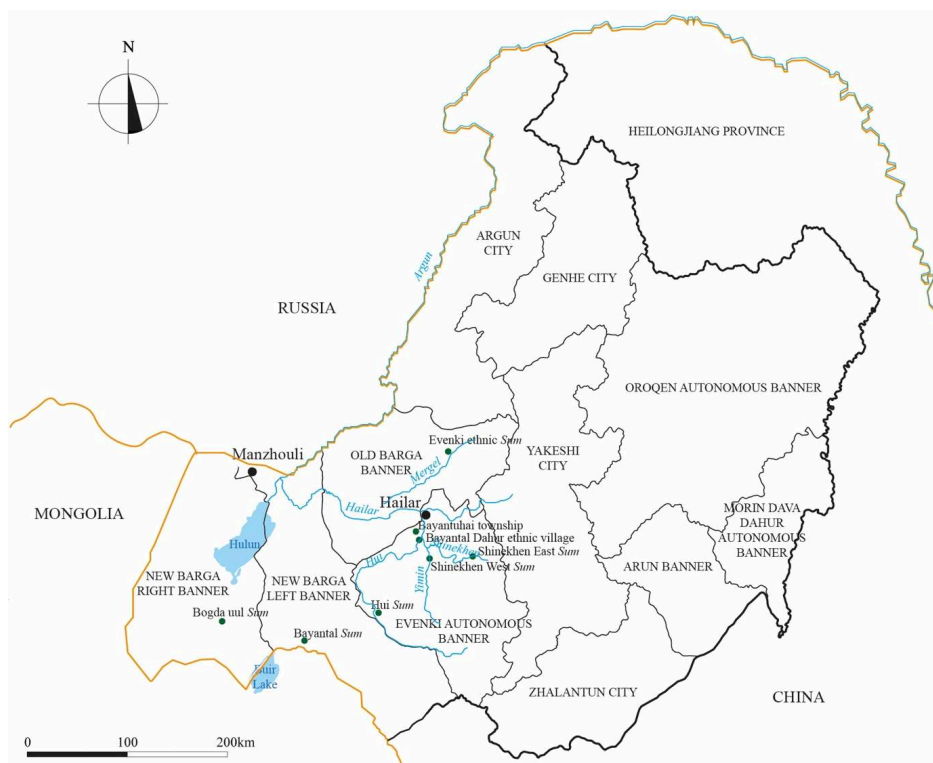
historical reality, this “official history” may have been taken up by the Buryats as “their history”. My aim was not to search for the truth but rather to juxtapose emic narratives with official history in order to present the various perceptions the Buryats may have of their own history.

- 6 By analyzing the construction of ovoos and their connected ritual ceremonies, I seek to explore how the Buryat people have found a way to legitimize themselves in their host country. What happens when a group of people crosses a border to settle in a territory where they become a minority group among other minority groups? And how can crossing borders produce innovative practices in a new homeland?
- 7 When the issue of minority groups in China is addressed, the official category of “ethnic group” (Ch. *minzu*) is never far away. The ethnic diversity of Hulun Buir and close interactions between diverse “ethnic minority groups” provide adequate terrain for anthropological research on ethnic groups. Without discounting the importance of such a political concept in contemporary China, my paper does not deal directly with it: it does not discuss the ethnicity classification, the political discourse or the social reality driven by this concept. Rather, it investigates the way Buryats perceive their community and situate themselves on what they now consider to be their territory.
- 8 Organized in a chronological structure, the first section of the paper offers a glimpse into the ethnic and political situation of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hulun Buir and shows how the construction of *ovoo* cairns followed the *yamen*’s political recognition of the Buryats. The second section first analyses how the displacement, destruction and reconstruction of these sacred cairns may reflect the way Buryat society has reorganized its social structure in a new homeland (*nutag* in Mongolian and Buryat). It then shows how the Shinehen local authorities play today an important role in shaping the Buryat community through *ovoo* rituals in contemporary Hulun Buir.

## From clan ovoos in Russia to administrative grouping ovoos in Republican China

- 9 The steppes of Hulun Buir consist of flat and undulating high plains and hills rising up to 750 m. Today, the Buryats worship six ovoos on the top of these hills in the Evenki Autonomous Banner of Hulun Buir. They are called Bayan Han, Erdeni Uul, Uitehen, Han Uul, Shibog, and Tarbagan. These six sacred cairns correspond broadly to the territorial organization of the Buryat community, divided into two *sums*: the Shinehen West *sum* and the Shinehen East *sum* subdivided into twelve *gachaas* over a territory of about 9 035 km<sup>2</sup> where the Buryats represent 85% of the total population (Jinba & Baolidao 2017, p. 79). Every year, the Buryats attend rituals at the *ovoo* located closest to their place of residence. *Ovoo* cairns have had distinct functions, varying from one era to another in different parts of Inner Asia. Their commonest function is to serve as a site of rituals devoted to various water/dragon divinities (Mo. *luus*) and master spirits of the land (Mo. *gazaryn ezen*). Under the Qing, a category of ovoos also served as boundary markers for demarcating administrative units such as banners (Pratte 2019, p. 6; Charleux, this volume) and pasturelands. In this paper, I discuss the Buryat *ovoo* as a sacred site for conducting ceremonies and as a concrete manifestation of the interconnection between a territory and the group of people who inhabit it.

Figure 1. Map of Hulun Buir



© drawn by Yola Gloaguen, 2021

- 10 While the dates of the construction of the six different Buryat ovoos remain unclear to most Buryats, their hierarchy is well known. For the Buryats, the hierarchy is understood as the order of importance of a given ovoo, which is defined by its size, location, the power of deities and by the number of lamas and participants attending the annual worship ceremony. The larger the ovoo, the more numerous are the worshippers and the higher the ovoo is placed in the hierarchy. The Buryats agree that their most eminent cairn is the Bayan Han Ovoos. No matter where they live, all Buryats of Hulun Buir attend the annual ritual of the Bayan Han Ovoos. It was to the Bayan Han Ovoos that I was taken for the first time in 2011. My Buryat informants told me that Bayan Han is a prestigious Buryat sacred site whose existence is acknowledged among other ethnic groups of the Evenki Autonomous Banner.

Figure 2. A view of the Bayan Han Owoo before the annual worship ceremony, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, June 2018



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- 11 Many Buryats do not have a clear explanation for the illustrious character of this cairn and the obligation to attend the ritual. It is only articulated as a rule that everyone follows for the well-being of the community and the fertility of the herds. It echoes what Lindskog has found among the herders of Mongolia: the performance of an *ovoo* ritual is privileged over understanding it (Lindskog 2016, p. 2). Indeed, what matters for worshippers is how they practice their ritual to gain the spirits' protection. However, for some elders and high-ranking lamas, the significance of the Bayan Han Owoo is related to its geographical position (it faces the Amban Owoo, the most powerful *ovoo* in Hulun Buir, as we will see later) and, more importantly, to the fact that, according to numerous oral histories passed down among the Buryat intelligentsia, it was the first *ovoo* erected in the 1920s after Buryat settlement in Chinese territory. While, as Christopher Evans and Caroline Humphrey have pointed out, *ovoos* are encoded “[...] in a timeless or abstract relation with political hierarchy” (Evans & Humphrey 2003, p. 200), I will show that, under certain circumstances, they may also be inscribed into a defined space-time continuum with the political order.

### The Buryats in Russia: a former homeland

- 12 As a newly formed territorial group of Buryats in exile in the 1920s, the Shinehen Buryats consist of representatives from various territorial groups (i.e. Khori Buryats, Ekhirit, etc.) and lineages from the Cis-Baikal and Transbaikal regions in Russia. However, the majority of the Shinehen Buryats came from the Aga-Onon steppe area next to the border with China. Although an official border was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century between the expanding Russian and Chinese empires, the borders between



Russia, Mongolia, and China often remained fluid (Chakars 2014, p. 26). Indeed, until the 1920s, the Buryats frequently crossed the borders with their herds, moving their encampments in accordance with the seasons (Baldano 2012, p. 184).

- 13 Some Buryat sources recently published in the People's Republic of China indicate that before moving to Russia, the Buryats lived in Hulun Buir, "which should thus be considered their ancestral homeland" (Xu *et al.* 2009, pp. 23-24; Tubuxinnima & Abida 2013). By promoting the view that China was, at some point, the homeland of the Buryats, these official sources serve to promote the integration of the Buryats into the Chinese multi-ethnic nation-state. As the anthropologist Ralph A. Litzinger has pointed out among the Yao, these official histories are constituted as part of the history of an ethnic group and thus of the People's Republic of China (Litzinger 1995, p. 122). However, for many Buryats, their ancestors have their roots in Russia. As one of my informants explained to me: "You see, we Buryats come from Russia, my grandmother was born there". As a matter of fact, many Buryats have an interest in Russia, especially the Republic of Buryatia where their kin still live.
- 14 When they lived in Russia, the Buryats mainly engaged in "five muzzles" (cattle, sheep, goat, horse and camel) herding. By the early 1900s, under the influence of the Russians, they started using horse-drawn haymaking, milk separator machines, portable stoves and other herding technologies later introduced into Hulun Buir and adopted by other Mongol and Tungus pastoralists. The Buryats were organized into eleven Khori exogamous clans; each clan was ruled by a chief (Mo. *darga*), designated according to hereditary and clan seniority. Pastureland rights and political decisions lay in the hands of the clan. In the 1820s, under the new system of native Siberian administration, the Buryats' clans were grouped into twelve steppe *dumas*, a kind of autonomous administrative organ composed of clan chiefs elected by their peers (Atwood 2004, pp. 4, 64). The elected clan chief henceforth served as an intermediary between Russian local officials and their subjects (Atwood 2004, p. 64). Furthermore, the Buryats were in a close relationship with the Khamnigan, a neighbouring Tungus ethnic group<sup>8</sup> closely related to the Buryats through marriage alliances. They would eventually flee to China together with the Buryats.
- 15 In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism developed rapidly in the Aga-Onon region, and the Buryats converted to Buddhism. "Within years from 1801, nine monasteries were built along the Onon and Aga rivers. Aga and Tsugol monasteries together had 1400 lamas" (Atwood 2004, p. 4). Besides Buddhist practices, every local section of a Buryat clan worshipped several ovoos where rituals were conducted by lamas (Humphrey & Onon 1996, p. 129). As well as being a territorial marker and a site of sacrifice to the local deities, the ovoos also possessed additional social functions, such as the symbolic reproduction of the clan. Humphrey and Onon (1996) have underlined the connection between the ovoos ritual and the reinforcement of patrilineal social structures: "the permanence and solidity of the mountain was an analogy for the 'eternal clan', and the 'renewal' of the mountain by adding stones to the cairn paralleled the renewal of the clan by new male births" (Humphrey & Onon 1996, p. 152). The Buryat clan ovoos ceremonies were also times when the clan chief could maintain and reinforce his authority over the community.
- 16 Buddhism also strongly influenced the laity: in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as having a great number of lamas and renowned intellectuals such as Tuguldur Toboev<sup>9</sup> (1795-1880), many of the Buryats of Aga-Onon area were literate<sup>10</sup> After the



construction of the Trans-Siberian railway between 1891 and 1916, the Buryat area developed dynamically, resulting in the emergence of wealthy herders (Xu *et al.* 2009, p. 27). During the October Revolution, attacks intensified against the Buryats, whose pastures and herds were destroyed: some young people were forcibly conscripted into the Red Army (Xu *et al.* 2009, p. 28). In order to escape Soviet repression, many rich Buryat herders and lamas<sup>11</sup> started crossing the border with their livestock in 1918 to settle in Mongolia<sup>12</sup> and China. They became Russian refugees in Chinese territory, where they would be later recognized as Chinese citizens and known under the new appellation of “Shinehen Buryats”.

## Ethnic rivalries, political power and clan *ovoos* in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hulun Buir

- 17 In 1916, a Buryat delegation from Russia, including the two leading figures Bazarin Namdag and Baldanov, as well as other nobles, went to the Hulun Buir *yamen* to apply for permission to migrate to Hulun Buir (Xu *et al.* 2009, p. 28). They dealt with two other major Daur political figures of that time, Gui Fu 贵福 (1862-1941) and Cheng De 成德 (1875-1932), the local court’s assistant military governor (*Ma. amban*)<sup>13</sup> and the director of the east department of the Hulun Buir *yamen*, respectively. The Daur<sup>14</sup>, a Mongol people, form a numerically small group practicing farming and herding in northeast China. They were organized into Manchu banners, where they played an important role in border defense. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Daur controlled the Hulun Buir *yamen*, rising to a position of dominance in the area during the republican period (Atwood 2005, p. 13).
- 18 In 1918, following another meeting between the Daur and Buryat parties which concluded with an official agreement for permanent settlement, the Buryats and the Khamnigan started moving south across the Chinese border and reached various areas of Hulun Buir.
- 19 The new refugees found themselves in a cosmopolitan frontier area where religious pluralism (the two major faiths were Buddhism and Shamanism), ethnic rivalries and political turmoil were intertwined. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Hulun Buir was inhabited by a diverse native population whose unity could not be underwritten by common history or ethnic markers such as language” (Atwood 2005, p. 6). These included the Mongolian-speaking Barga, Ölöṭ and Daur peoples, as well as the Solon and Orochen Tungus peoples: they all competed for territory, especially pasturelands. This ethnic configuration was also the result of Manchu military policies. During the Qing era, most of these pastoralists had been integrated into the Manchu Eight Banners (Ch. *baqi* 八旗), in which they took on various military functions as bannermen. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, in order to prevent Russian incursion into their territory, the Manchu rulers established the Hulun Buir banner garrisons and relocated thousands of Mongol (Barga, Ölöṭ and Daur) and Tungus (Solon, Orochen) groups to these well-watered pasture areas. As Kim has demonstrated, the institution of the Hulun Buir garrison changed not only the region’s military geography but also its demographics (Kim 2019, p. 119).
- 20 Waves of migration were punctuated by the construction of new *ovoos* cairns, thus linking groups of people to their new territory and in turn legitimizing their right to use pasturelands. Local sources and the oral histories I gathered during my fieldwork

among the Tungus and Mongol descendants of the bannermen recall how their ancestors erected ovoos upon their arrival in the Hulun Buir steppe between the mid-18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Dumont 2017, p. 205). Clans, territorial organization, political position and pasture boundaries were thus carefully marked out by hundreds of ovoos throughout Hulun Buir. Furthermore, the ovoos were structured according to a well-known political hierarchy that stretched from the top banner and military ovoos to the clan-based ovoos. On the one hand, top ovoos – representing the *yamen*'s political power – were few in number and were built in visible areas next to the administrative center of Hailar City. The Bayan Hoshuu and Amban Ovoos were among the highest ranking ovoos and were worshipped by high officials. Soon after the Solon were organized into the four Solon banners in 1732, the Qing government established the Hulun Buir military local office, together with two commanders: they established a banner ovoo known as the Bayan Hoshuu Ovoo 39 km from Hailar, where military officers, local politicians and herdsmen gathered annually for worship (Batudelige'er 2014, pp. 45-46). The Amban Ovoo overlooked (and still overlooks) Hailar City: it is one of the only ovoo situated in an urban area. An oral history known by all the different local communities today states that this ovoo was especially created by the Daur Amban Gui Fu at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Hulun Buir's most prestigious ovoo in terms of political hierarchy, it was worshipped on the third day of the fifth lunar month of the Lunar calendar; after this, other ovoo celebrations could start. The top ovoos followed the establishment of the political structure; the great sacrifices dedicated to the cairns were a continuation of political power and a way to increase its significance. Ovoo rituals were major public rituals where the different social spheres of Hulun Buir society could show up and demonstrate authority, respect or allegiance according to their rank in the hierarchy.

- 21 On the other hand, the steppe had hundreds of small clan ovoos worshipped by the former Solon, Ölöt, Barga and Daur bannermen<sup>15</sup>. If these ovoo rituals were less imposing, they nonetheless strengthened the consolidation of the clan and its territorial position whilst also reflecting Hulun Buir's ethnic and clan configuration. For instance, all the ovoos worshipped by Daur clans were positioned near Hailar City, the political and economic heart of Hulun Buir. This strategic location displayed the Daur clans' prestigious status in the previous Qing Manchu administration.
- 22 This was the ethnic and political configuration of Hulun Buir when the Buryats arrived in the early 1920s. After the October Revolution, the Buryats continued to arrive in Hulun Buir in waves. While they were allowed by the Hulun Buir *yamen* to stay permanently, they were not yet formally recognized as citizens. This would be accomplished in 1922, when the Hulun Buir *yamen* agreed to the creation of the Buryat banner and its adjacent Bayan Han Ovoo in the Shinehen area. The dedicated administrative unit for the Buryats was established alongside their identification as official citizens of the Republic of China. In a report of 1921 intended for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gui Fu wrote: "It is clear that Hulun Buir is an old homeland for the Buryats, since they are of the same tribe and clans as the people of all banners who are subjects of Hulun Buir" (Hürelbaatar 2000, p. 75). For the Daur officials, the Buryats were considered kin coming back to their ancestral homeland and thus could be easily associated with the Mongol Barga in terms of language, religion and domestic pastoral economy. This political recognition by the Daur high officials also has to be understood within the context of the political instability in the area. After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Hulun Buir became a leading location for pan-Mongol ideas. The

independence movement in Outer Mongolia found an echo in Hulun Buir under the Daur, who promoted cultural and political identification with the Mongols (Bulag 2002, p. 149). By recognizing the Buryats as citizens of Hulun Buir, the Daur officials may have supported the idea that Hulun Buir should be treated as a distinct ethnic territory.

### Erecting Buryat administrative grouping ovoos on the territory of other ethnic groups

- 23 In 1922, with the creation of the Buryat Banner, “the Buryats were allotted 1 000 m<sup>2</sup> of pastureland for fifty years on a territory once occupied by the Ölot [and the Solon], who were less numerous due to the [Manchurian] plague [epidemic]<sup>16</sup> that had occurred in 1910” (NZEY & HEY 2007, p. 174). According to the historian Marina Baldano, the territory allotted to the Buryats in the 1920s was also infected by anthrax, and the refugees had to burn pastures repeatedly to disinfect them (Baldano 2012, p. 186). Anthropologist Konagaya Yuki adds that after a Buddhist lama performed a purification ceremony on the infected land, the Buryats were relieved (Konagaya 2016, p. 149). Whatever actually occurred, it is clear that the Buryats did not arrive in an unoccupied land: they “appropriated” pastures once used by other pastoralists. However, as Sneath has shown, the Mongol pastoralists did not own pastures as such but had customary use-rights under the jurisdiction of a local political authority (Sneath 2001, p. 44). When the Buryats arrived in Hulun Buir, they erected new ovoos that made physically manifest the legitimacy of their usage of the land, under the patronage of the Hulun Buir *yamen*. Traces of this former occupation by other groups are still clear throughout the sacred landscape. One day, while we were going by car from Hailar City to a *gachaa*, my Buryat informants opened the window to make some milk offerings towards a mountain. I asked them about the meaning of making offerings to this particular mountain. They replied that these offerings were dedicated to the Bogoo Ovoo on the top of this mountain. Today, Bogoo Ovoo is a name place known among all the Buryats. Some say that this site was once a clan ovoo worshipped by the Ölot, while others claim that it was worshipped by the Solon and their clan shaman. This same ovoo was then worshipped by the Buryats as their own sacred site. Over time, the cairn disappeared and the Bogoo Ovoo became a Buryat burial ground, where everyone who passes still makes a small offering. The spatial and temporal dynamics of Bogoo Ovoo worship show that even after their physical disappearance, ovoos are often remembered and worshipped as important sacred sites in the landscape.
- 24 Buryats and their livestock became the constituent subjects of a socio-economic order ruled by Hulun Buir *yamen*. After the creation of the Buryat banner in 1922, one hundred sixty households comprising of seven hundred Buryat people settled in their new territory.

Figure 3. Young Buryats in Hulun Buir in the early 1930s



© Yonaiyama 1938, p. 239

- 25 The banner was administrated by a chief and organized into four *sums*, each ruled by a *zangi*, a Manchu term meaning a chief or an administrator of a *sum* (Xu *et al.* 2009, pp. 28-29). The previous *duma* that had ruled the Buryat clan organization in Russia was to be replaced by the former Qing banner and *sum* system in Hulun Buir. In his detailed work on the history of the Shinehen Buryats, the anthropologist A. Hürelbaatar has shown that when the Buryats settled in Hulun Buir, “people of the same clan were organized into different administrative units [*sums*] in order of their arrival rather than by clans” (Hürelbaatar 2000, p. 84). This new social organization had a direct impact on the way people constructed and worshipped their *ovoo* cairns in their new homeland. Having crossed the border to settle in Chinese territory, the Buryats actually “lost” the clan *ovoos* they once worshipped in Russia in exchange for the administrative grouping *ovoos* in China. This means that new Buryat *ovoos* in China were no longer worshipped by people in accordance with clan and lineage; rather, they were now worshipped by people linked by a common administrative territory. In the same manner, these *ovoos* reflected this significant social and territorial change.
- 26 People believe that the first administrative grouping *ovoo* built in Shinehen territory was the Bayan Han *Ovoo*. Its construction probably occurred alongside the big *naadam* or the “three manly games”, a sporting celebration consisting of horse-racing, wrestling and archery organized in 1924 to celebrate the two-year anniversary of the foundation of the Buryat banner. The Daur high officials Gui Fu and Cheng De attended the festivities, where they received ceremonial scarfs (*Mo. hadag*) and a silver saddle from the Buryats.

Figure 4. Oil painting representing the Buryats offering ceremonial scarfs (*hadag*) to Daur high officials during a *naadam* in the 1920s



Author and date unknown. Museum of Hulun Buir local court, Hailar, Hulun Buir

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- 27 This *naadam*, together with the erection of the Bayan Han Ovoo, symbolically marked the political recognition of the Buryats by the Hulun Buir *yamen* and the loyalty of the newcomers to the administrative and political system. The concept of switching loyalties among transborder Buryats has been discussed by the anthropologist Sayana Namsaraeva. The author shows that Buryats' multiple allegiances to different states and regimes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century were made possible by different combinations of identities and identifications (Namsaraeva 2017, pp. 407-408).
- 28 We should pay attention to the strategic geographical position of the Bayan Han Ovoo. It was erected in a place that allows one to see the prestigious Amban Ovoo. However, while the Bayan Han Ovoo became important for the Buryat community, this is not just because it was the first sacred cairn erected in their new homeland. It is also because it is the sole *ovoo* to be worshipped on a fixed date, the thirteen day of the fifth month. Mizhid Dorzh, who has been a lama within the Buryat community for more than thirty years, offered me an explanation of this particular date. This was the precise date on which the Ninth Panchen Lama Thubten Chökyi Nyima (Tib. Thub bstan chos kyi nyi ma, 1883-1937) is believed to have conducted a ceremony in the newly built Buryat Shinehen Monastery (Mo. Shinehen süme) when he visited Hulun Buir between the late 1920s and the early 1930s<sup>17</sup>. The Ninth Panchen Lama was the second highest-ranking lama in the Tibeto-Mongol Buddhist hierarchy and was invited by Mongol princes to hold rituals that would attract thousands of people seeking his protection (Bulag 2010, p. 74). For the newly established Buryats, the Panchen Lama also played a significant role, especially in terms of recognizing them as a lawful Buddhist community in Hulun Buir<sup>18</sup>. According to Bei and Amin, the Buryats carefully prepared for the arrival of the Panchen Lama in the Shinehen Monastery. When they settled in Hulun Buir, the Buryats adopted an old monastery that had once belonged to the Ölot and created a new place for religious activities (Bei & Amin 2013, pp. 235-236). In 1927, after receiving



official assent from the Hulun Buir *yamen* and from the head of the Ölöṭ Banner, the Buryats restored the monastery and organized a big *naadam* to celebrate the creation of the Buryat Shinehen Monastery (Xu *et al.* 2009, p. 257). The Buryats collected money and invited the Ninth Panchen Lama, who finally conducted a ceremony in the Shinehen Monastery in 1931 (Bei & Amin 2013, pp. 235-236). Further oral testimonies indicate that the Panchen Lama may have also conducted a ritual at the Bayan Han Ovoo on the thirteen day of the fifth month of that year. According to most Buryat lamas officiating at the Shinehen Monastery today, the supposed visit of the Panchen Lama to the Buryat community bestowed prestige on their religious sites.

- 29 For many years, the Buryat population grew and adapted to its new territory. The Buryats became rapidly well known for their modern equipment and livestock technology (such as haymaking machines and cattle selection) brought from Russia (Namsaraeva 2012b, p. 233) and introduced to the neighboring pastoralists of Hulun Buir. As the Buryat community increased, more ovoos were progressively constructed. The Han Uul Ovoo is one of them. According to my informants, it is believed to have been built in Hulun Buir in the 1920s by rich Buryat herders who once worshipped five clan ovoos in Russia. The appellations of these five clan ovoos all ended with “Han Uul”. After their arrival in Shinehen, the newcomers “lost” their clan ovoo and built one in its place administrative grouping ovoos on the top of the mountain near their new *sum*. In memory of their homeland, but also to “appropriate” the new territory, they gave the name “Han Uul” to the mountain on which the cairn was erected<sup>19</sup>.
- 30 In 1929, four more *sums* were added to the Buryat banner, whose population reached three thousand people (Xu *et al.* 2009, p. 29). Very soon after creating their different ovoos, the Buryats started taking part in the Bayan Hoshuu Ovoo ritual, one of the most prominent banner ovoo of the time. As two Chinese observers noted in the 1920s: “Every three years in May, a big ovoo ritual was held in Hailar on the top of the mountain on the north side of the river. All the small and high officials took part in this ritual, where a lama gave prayers” (Zhang & Cheng 2012, p. 199). Between 1929 and 1932, the Anglo-Swedish anthropologist Ethel J. Lindgren conducted fieldwork among the different Tungus and Mongol groups of Hulun Buir. Together with the Norwegian photographer Oscar Mamen, they took pictures and filmed short sequences of people’s everyday life<sup>20</sup>. One of these short movies was dedicated to the Bayan Hoshuu Ovoo ritual of 1932. Attending the ritual, Lindgren noticed the highly politicized character of the ritual and the growing influence of the Buryats in the area:
- After the [Buddhist] service, the *amban* and his officials collect at the obo to take part in a solemn ceremony [...]. Officials, lamas and populace then join in a procession around the obo, scattering papers stamped with Buddhist symbols. [...]. A few days later, the rumor spreads that a new obo is to be founded by the Transbaikal Buriats”. (Lindgren 1932)
- 31 Within a decade, the status of the Buryats had changed from foreign refugees to fully recognized citizens of Republican China. The construction of Buryat ovoo cairns and the participation of the Buryats in Bayan Hoshuu Ovoo ceremonies demonstrate their integration into the Hulun Buir ethnic and political landscape. However, as the ovoos may be understood as a symbolic exemplification of political and religious recognition, they may also offer significant clues for understanding how a society transforms a new territory into its homeland by using different skills and practices.



## Moving, destroying and rebuilding ovoos to create a new homeland in China

- 32 Situated at the intersection of Russia and Mongolia, Hulun Buir has been, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a strategic frontier area where different political powers have competed to establish their legitimacy. This resulted in successive waves of migration through the porous borders of Northern Asia. Once again, oboo cairns may offer an insight into transborder migrations and how people experience these movements and relocations. Indeed, every oboo possesses its own story, revealing the historical or political circumstances under which a group of people settled in a given locality and marked it as its own. An oboo may cease to exist or it may be rebuilt in its original place or another location in accordance with migration waves and (re)settlement (Dumont 2017, pp. 202-203). Numerous oral stories tell how ovoos were destroyed during the Japanese occupation (1931-1945) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and then rebuilt elsewhere. How did the (re)construction of Buryat ovoos happen on Chinese territory? How did Buryat newcomers transfer their understanding of sacred landscape from one border to another? And how did the Buryat community experience and worship their “transplanted” holy monuments in the political turmoil of the last century?

### Transporting pieces of the sacred

- 33 According to Baldano, the relocation of the Buryats on the other side of the border led to the reestablishment of sociality and the new establishment of social and economic structures (Baldano 2012, p. 186). This is also true for religious activities, as we have seen with the (re)construction of ovoos and the renovation of a Buddhist monastery. This raises the question of how people reorganize the topography of their sacred sites and deal with the related deities when they move to a new territory. As Humphrey has noted, “oboo cairns are believed to be the seat of the spirits who may come and go, but have their main abode on the mountain” (Humphrey 2016, p. 108). People would pay respect to these master spirits of the land<sup>21</sup> in exchange for their protection and thus create a symbolic tie between people and their sacred homeland. When the Buryat people (re)built their oboo cairns in China, they had to find an appropriate location while also managing to keep it sacred and welcoming to spirits.
- 34 Rebuilding an oboo, whether in a new territory or in its original place, requires the building process to start from scratch: one needs to find a suitable location on high ground which is free of other buildings and is sanctioned by a lama (or a shaman); then one piles up certain stones with the assistance of willows<sup>22</sup>. However, one interesting point is that rebuilt ovoos very often contain a piece of sacred material that belonged to the former oboo.
- 35 Let us return to Buryat narratives recalling how pieces of the sacred oboo were carried from place to place. As we have seen earlier in this paper, the Bayan Han Oboo stands high in the sacred topography of Shinehen Buryats. The prestigious position of the Bayan Han Oboo cairn is also connected with the special power conveyed by a piece of the sacred. According to oral stories gathered by Hüreibaatar in the late 1990s among the Shinehen elders, when the Buryats crossed the border in 1918, they brought a vessel (*Mo. bumba*) with nine jewels from the Aga region that was placed under the

rebuilt ovoos<sup>23</sup> (Hürelbaatar 2002, p. 71). “It is said that the spirit of the Bayan Khan was a wrathful hero who holds a bow and an arrow” (Hürelbaatar 2000, pp. 109-110). The Buryat elders I interviewed in the 2010s remember from their childhood (or from their parents’ experience) the destruction of the Bayan Han Owoo during the Japanese occupation. The owoo was demolished by the Japanese soldiers, who dug trenches on the owoo site. The Buryats rebuilt the owoo 20 kilometres away with new stones and willows and carefully moved the vessel that was placed under the rebuilt cairn. This process was repeated each time the owoo cairn was destroyed, moved and rebuilt after the civil war and before and after the Cultural Revolution. This suggests that the owoo’s sacred power was extended to a new place through the holy vessel that once belonged to the previous owoo in Russia. This piece of sacred material, believed to be a favourable dwelling place for local spirits during rituals, was transferred to the base of the new cairn: this allowed the local spirits to resettle, thus maintaining and reinforcing the link between people, spirits and the new territory.

- 36 Being interested in the narratives of other ethnic groups of Hulun Buir about their owoo cairns, I gathered the story of the Bayan Delger Owoo from various members of the Khamnigan ethnic group, who crossed the border from Russia to China together with the Buryats. Like the Buryats, the Khamnigan were organized by the Hulun Buir *yamen* into administrative *sum* groupings. They also “lost” the various clan ovoos they previously worshipped in Russia which were replaced by the Bayan Delger administrative grouping Owoo in Chinese territory. The grandson of Pashka, the first Khamnigan *zangi* in Hulun Buir, recounted to me how the cairn was displaced several times over the decades. After crossing the border in the early 1920s, Pashka, a rich herdsman, became the *zangi* of a place called Teni and founded an owoo. Some years later, due to the growing number of Khamnigan in the new territory, Pashka decided to settle his community in a locality called Honghur, where the owoo was rebuilt on an even larger scale. Finally, in the 1950s, the Bayan Delger Owoo was again rebuilt into the “Evenki *sum*” by the new communist regime. I then met the daughter of the renowned Khamnigan shaman Seregma, who officiated from the 1930s to the mid-1960s. She added useful details to the story of the Bayan Delger Owoo. Pashka and his clan members crossed the border with some stones taken from their clan owoo in Russia. These stones were then used to build Bayan Delger Owoo in China. Each time the owoo was moved, the stones were carefully transported to the new location: after being placed on the site, they were covered with new stones from the local area. Apart from conducting the annual ceremony of owoo worship, the shaman Seregma was also in charge of moving the sacred stones every time it was necessary to displace the owoo. She was asked to perform this duty by the clan members because, as a ritual specialist, she was considered as the most suitable and powerful person to deal with sacred entities. The sacred entities contained in an owoo, in the material forms of vessels and stones, had to be kept intact so that they could be reactivated elsewhere and allow the group to exist in their new sacred homeland. The process of moving sacred pieces described in these two stories resonates with the ritual of “incense division” (Ch. *fenxiang* 分香) known in Chinese religion. Sinologist Kristofer Schipper (1990) has analyzed how the “incense division” ritual allows new branches of a cult to worship a common deity outside of the mother temple. When a new temple is built, its incense burner is filled with the ashes and coals used in an old temple. In doing so, worshippers ultimately worship the same deity. By similar reasoning, Buryat refugees have thought

of a way to perpetuate the connection with spirits that govern prosperity, abundance and green pastures on the community's new homeland.

- 37 Namsaraeva (2012a) has furthermore brought to light the pastoral techniques used by the Buryats in exile to create a home in a new location. In order to gain approval for settling in a new territory, people make a ritual donation to the local spirits. One of the techniques used to get the spirits' consent is to fill and bury a vessel with valuable items before building a house. "After this moment the site was considered occupied and it belonged to the family, with the right to pass it on down the patrilineal line" (Namsaraeva 2012a, p. 146). In the same manner, the anthropologist Manduhai Buyandelger has shown that the Buryats living in Mongolia remember their past through shamanic practices that are intimately linked to their experience of displacement and marginalization (Buyandelger 2013, p. 62). Transporting pieces of the sacred across borders fits with what the anthropologists Marianne Holm Pedersen and Mikkel Rytter have called "rituals of migration" (Holm Pedersen & Rytter 2018). By doing so, the Buryats sought to sustain and recreate ritual practices from their places of origin. The newly built ovoos were worshipped regularly until the 1950s. These rituals not only constituted a central dimension in the Buryat process of settlement and place making in their new living territory, but also supported Buryat social organization in new administrative areas.
- 38 Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Communist state created a new ethnic and territorial framework in Hulun Buir in order to satisfy its political agenda. On the conclusion of the "Ethnic Classification Project" (Ch. *Minzu shibie* 民族识别), launched in the 1950s to classify the country's population into various ethnic groups, the Daur became a single "ethnic group", the Solon and the Khamnigan were merged together with another group of reindeer herders into the "Evenki ethnic group". The Buryats, a few thousand strong, were dissolved into the much larger "Mongol ethnic group" in 1957, while their Buryat banner was abolished. The "Evenki Autonomous Banner" was founded in 1958, and divided into *sums* and *gachaas*: the Buryats were dispersed among two *sums*. However, besides a few exceptions, the new territorial framework did not bring much change.
- 39 The Cultural Revolution put a violent end to religious activities. Thousands of people, especially lamas, were persecuted and arrested while the monasteries and ovoos were destroyed across the whole territory of Hulun Buir. Some people managed to hide their sacred objects quickly enough to avoid destruction. This was the case for the shaman Seregma who buried her shamanic costume in a virgin area of the steppe, as her daughter recounted to me. When she passed away in the early 1980s, her body was disposed of near her costume and a shaman burial site (Evk. *sindang*) was built nearby. Many oral stories describe how the Red Guards were struck by sudden death or severe injuries after destroying ovoos and shamanic costumes: it was believed that the anger of the deities was the reason for these incidents. While the ovoos rituals were banned, the *naadam* were carefully adapted to the new political ideology, producing heroes who distinguished themselves in various national competitions for the new socialist "multi-ethnic Chinese nation". Even today, the political dimension of sport remains institutionalized. For example, in 2012, sports events were held to honor the eighteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: equally in 2017, games were used to mark the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

40 However, the systematic destruction of ovoos during the Cultural Revolution did not end the Buryat and other groups' sense of belonging to what had become their homeland. After the reforms launched in the late 1970s, religious activities slowly became tolerated, and the ovoos were gradually rebuilt. Before rebuilding, people still tried to find the exact sites where their sacred cairns were located before the Cultural Revolution. Unsurprisingly, when the Buryats started to reconstruct their cairns in the mid-1980s, the first to be rebuilt was the Bayan Han Owoo.

## Ovoo rituals and politics in contemporary Hulun Buir

41 Over the past three decades, ovoos worship ceremonies and *naadam* games have been central ritual celebrations that structure the summer season in Hulun Buir from the end of May to early July. They are actively promoted by the Hulun Buir authorities at every level of the administrative structure as part of the "Open up the West"<sup>24</sup> policy and cultural heritage policy, the aim of which is to develop tourism. As such, "ovoo rituals" were inscribed in 2006 on the Chinese national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage under the category of "folk custom" (Ch. *minsu* 民俗): the term "religion" cannot be used to describe any item of the Chinese list. According to Sneath, in the Mongolian cultural world of today, "Just as cosmopolitical ceremonial has been re-contextualised as national heritage, so, new forms of cosmopolitics have become possible and are bound up with notions of indigeneity and national heritage" (Sneath 2014, p. 468).

42 For their part, the local societies of Hulun Buir also took an active part in this process of ritual reactivation. The revival of ovoos rituals began in the mid-1980s, when the Hulun Buir government started the reconstruction of banner ovoos. In the late 1980s, Sneath attended a revived clan ovoos ceremony among the Mongol Barga of Hulun Buir. He noted that local people started performing their rituals again only after the authorities took the initiative of conducting a revived banner ovoos ritual. Sneath argues that this is a classic example of the Chinese system of "leading from the top", where the authorities first implement a rule at the centre and then show how peripheral areas should follow (Sneath 1991, p. 58). Coincidentally, the Chinese political view matches the ovoos ranking, which is defined by a political hierarchy. In Hulun Buir, it is broadly structured as follows: the top ovoos such as banner ovoos and the Amban Owoo worshipped by higher political organs (Hulun Buir municipality and banners); the *sum* ovoos worshipped by administrative groupings, such as the Buryats; and the clan ovoos worshipped by a given clan.

43 What about the Buryat ovoos among the myriad of cairns spread over Hulun Buir? Apart from their six ovoos, which are scattered over the Shinehen West *sum* and the Shinehen East *sum* of the Evenki Autonomous Banner, the Buryats also worship the Amban and the Bayan Hoshuu Ovoos since both are on Buryat territory. It is interesting to note that the Buryats consider their ovoos as "top ovoos": they are supposedly more elaborate and larger than the "small clan ovoos" worshipped by their Daur, Barga and Solon neighbors. From an administrative point of view, the Buryat ovoos fall into the categories of "*sum* ovoos" and "*gachaa* ovoos", cairns worshipped by a people living in a common *sum* or *gachaa* and financed by these two units. In most cases, *sum* and *gachaa* ovoos are worshipped by people from the same administrative unit, regardless of their ethnic category. However, the Buryat ovoos are an exception to this rule: while they are

administrative grouping ovoos, they are worshipped exclusively by the Buryats (although one is also worshipped by the Khamnigan).

- 44 The Buryats still enforce a rigorous hierarchy of importance on their six ovoos, which is manifested in the way the Shinehen Buryat local authorities organize their annual rituals. In contrast to the clan *ovoo* annual worship ceremonies, the arrangement and expenses of which are exclusively supported by clan members<sup>25</sup> under the supervision of the *ovoo* chief (*Mo. ovoo darga*)<sup>26</sup>, the Buryat *ovoo* rituals are organized and financially supported by the Shinehen local government. The latter is structured into two *sums*, the Shinehen West *sum* divided into four *gachaas* and the Shinehen East *sum* divided into eight *gachaas*: each unit is administrated by a Buryat leader. The political importance of the authorities involved in the *ovoo* ritual is proportional to the rank assigned to the *ovoo*. Based on the same logic, the money spent on the festivities, the number of lamas and the nature of the prizes awarded depend upon the importance of the sacred cairn. The Bayan Han *Ovoo* ritual is organized every year alternately by the two *sums*, the highest administrative unit of the Buryats.

Figure 5. Worshippers are making offerings to Bayan Han *Ovoo*, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, June 2017



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- 45 Alongside a large number of Buryat worshippers, the political leaders of the two *sums*, the twelve *gachaas* and the high-ranking Buryat lamas participate in the Bayan Han *Ovoo* festivities. According to what the Buryat *sum* leader told me, in 2017, a total of 80 000 yuan (approximately US\$ 11 200) was allotted to the worship ceremonies of the Bayan Han *Ovoo*, which is a significant amount of money at the local level. The money comes from a special fund dedicated to *ovoo* rituals and *naadam* games. In order of rank, the five other Buryat ovoos are worshipped as follows: the three other “big *ovoo*” rituals

are administered by one *gachaa* out of four or six every year, while the two “small ovoo” rituals are organized annually by the same *gachaa*. Members of the Shinehen local authorities play a crucial role in the organization of ovoo worship. Before the ritual, they collect extra money from those who wish to donate, bring the principal offering (a sheep’s head) to the ovoo site and clean the location after the ritual. During ovoo rituals, members of the local authorities sit in the yurt built for the lamas who read prayers. Officially, there is no ovoo chief among the Buryats (in contrast to clan ovoos), since, according to Chinese local law, no member of any government body has the right to hold an official position relating to “superstitious activities”.

- 46 Every year, Buryat people attend the ritual nearest to their place of residence and in accordance with their administrative grouping. The Bayan Han and Erdeni Uul Ovoos are exceptions, since the entire community gathers at these two rituals. Everybody assumes that, as well as being large and important ovoos, the Bayan Han and the Erdeni Uul cairns both possess special ritual efficiency. The deities worshipped at the Bayan Han Ovoos are supposed to convey power to people while those worshipped at Erdeni Uul bless people with wealth. It is said that Buryats are wealthier than other people because they have the Erdeni Uul Ovoos (Hürelbaatar 2000, p. 110).
- 47 Ovoos always follow the same process during which people activate ordered ritual techniques and behavior in order to enter into contact with the spirits of the land. I will give below a brief description of a Buryat ovoos ritual according to my observations.
- 48 On the day of the ritual, brightly dressed in their Buryat traditional costumes, worshippers gather at the ovoos site early in the morning. Both men and women from the same nuclear family arrive by car or motorcycle<sup>27</sup> at the bottom of the mountain. They take their offerings (candies, milk, cakes, and alcohol, mainly the Chinese liquor *baijiu* 白酒, etc.) and climb up to the ovoos site, where they start circumambulating clockwise three times around the cairn while “feeding” the spirits with milk or liquor. The ovoos is meanwhile renovated by men who reach the upper part of the cairn and replace the old willow branches with freshly cut ones. Just as nature goes through a cycle of renewal, producing green grass, calves and milk, the ovoos is renewed by ritual actions of men that symbolically ensure the perpetuation of the male-based group. In traditional Mongol society, women are not allowed to ascend to the ovoos cairn nor attend the ritual. Furthermore, they rarely compete in the *naadam*, the “three manly games”. Mountain worship and its related games are indeed dedicated to the celebration of male power. Apart from lacking strength, another reason given by locals to explain the exclusion of women is their “impurity”. The mountain and adjacent source of water should remain clean of any pollution (i.e. blood). According to my informants, since the revival of ovoos rituals in the 1980s, the presence of women is less or more tolerated, depending on the ovoos and the community. Among the Buryats, the Han Uul Ovoos and the Shibog Ovoos, both situated on high hills, are forbidden to women. They must stay at the bottom of the hill to make their circumambulation. The four other ovoos are not forbidden to women. However, while they are allowed climb the hill, women are never allowed to reach the upper part of the cairn, as men do.
- 49 When the ovoos is ready with offerings, lamas, numbering from two to more than ten for “big” ovoos, start reading prayers for at least two hours. Throughout the ritual, worshippers may keep feeding the deities and sit, talking with each other. Indeed, ovoos rituals are also gatherings for people who rarely meet. Worship usually ends with the gathering of worshippers: under the supervision of the lamas, worshippers take their



offerings in their hands and make a circular movement, saying “*hurai hurai*”, which means “to reach, to collect [fortune]”<sup>28</sup>. When the ritual ends, people gather to share food at the bottom of the mountain where the *naadam* games will take place.

Figure 6. Worshippers are listening to lama's prayers during Erdeni Uul Ovoo ritual, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, June 2018



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Figure 7. Buryat lama after reading prayers during Uitehen Ovoo ritual, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, June 2019



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- 50 In the early afternoon, the *naadam* games, consisting of horse racing, archery and wrestling, are held at the bottom of the ovoo cairn. The winners are granted different awards, ranging from sheep to money, all funded by the Shinehen local government. The *naadam* and the ovoo worship both aim to establish reciprocity with the deities in order to obtain community welfare, good pastures, abundant rain, and herd fertility.
- 51 The Buryats' existence and identity are activated annually by the Shinehen local government when the ovoo cairns are renewed. As Sneath has stated for Mongolia, "ceremony and public ritual continue to play an important role in projects to reconstruct tradition, assert collective identity and deploy concepts of belonging" (Sneath 2010, p. 261). In Hulun Buir, the ovoo ritual remains a means for recognizing the existence of a group which does not appear in the official Chinese ethnic classification. Although they are officially Mongols (as recorded on ID cards, driving licenses, and all other official documents), the Buryats consider themselves a different group. As in Russia, where the Buryats function socially and politically as a people distinct from the Mongols despite their acknowledged Mongol origin and affinity (Atwood 2004, p. 61), in Hulun Buir, they are differentiated from other Mongolian-speaking groups (Barga, Daur, Ölöť and nowadays Horchin<sup>29</sup>) by their dialect, preference for intermarriage within their community and their ability to keep their various "traditions" (clothes, marriage, and celebrations that follow a strict set of rules with a minimum of Chinese influence) alive. For example, wearing the Buryat *deel*, which is very different from the *deel* of other Mongol groups, is an implicit norm for anyone taking part in ovoo worship and other significant celebrations, such as marriages, sports or visits to monasteries. In addition, traditional dress represents an ethnic marker between groups living in Hulun

Buir: each has an identifiable costume with its own fabric, form and way of tying the belt.

Figure 8. Buryat men after an *ovoo* ritual



Men on the left and right side wear the *tshobo*, a Buryat traditional clothe made of felt. The cone-shaped hat, also made of felt, is called a *yodang*, Evenki Autonomous Banner, Hulun Buir, June 2017

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- 52 Although everybody can, in principle, take part in *ovoo* worship, attendance at Buryat *ovoo* celebrations is restricted according to ethnic belonging (Solon, Khamnigan, Daur, etc.). Breaking this rule may be interpreted as an act of defiance, especially in areas where ethnic tensions are high (Dumont 2017, p.208)<sup>30</sup>, despite the political proclamation of “harmony between ethnic nationalities”. However, under certain circumstances, people from other ethnic groups<sup>31</sup> are allowed to attend. In June 2019, for example, several Barga archers attended the *ovoo* ritual in order to take part in the archery competition held in the afternoon.
- 53 It is worth mentioning that Hulun Buir today has as many *ovoos* as clans and ethnic groups. By mapping the geographical distribution of *ovoos* in the area, one receives an accurate overview of the territorial, ethnic and clan configuration of local societies that differs from the official ethnic composition given by the Chinese classification system. In this respect, the Buryat *ovoo* provides a meaningful perspective on the way the Buryat community is integrated within the most multi-ethnic area of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region.

## Concluding remarks

- 54 The present paper aimed to show how sacred *ovoos* cairns and their annual rituals have served as powerful symbols for Buryat identification and self-identification throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the Russian Revolution, the Buryats left their homeland of Aga and crossed the boundaries with their herds to settle in China. There, they established themselves in an unknown territory that gradually became their new homeland. The link connecting the Buryats to their new territory was and is still made manifest by the gradual construction of *ovoos* cairns. These sacred cairns can be understood as supports for local and religious history since they offer a glimpse into the way local societies have organized their territory and sacred landscape over decades. As Humphrey has suggested, “the mountains, the boundary shrines [...] are points of concentrated memory and emotion to which people relate their everyday lives” (Humphrey 2016, p. 116). My aim was to show that *ovoos* are more than simple religious cairns built by a community of worshippers. Narratives about *ovoos* and the way they have been built, moved and worshipped throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century are also discursive roots for people’s perception of their local history and experience within the North Asian borderlands. Equally, the *ovoos* are also at the intersection of several perspectives connecting territory, identity and politics. The construction of Buryat *ovoos* cairns reveals parallel processes that occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the political recognition of the Buryats by the local court and the appropriation and transformation of an unknown territory into a Buryat sacred homeland.
- 55 *Ovoo* rituals are also powerful vectors for the Buryats’ attachment to a distinct community. As we have seen, under the political leadership of the Buryat local government, the *ovoos* rituals promote the Buryats as being a visible community in the Hulun Buir landscape despite their lack of official recognition in the Chinese bureaucratic system. I would follow Baldano’s idea of “autonomous ethnolocal identity” (Baldano 2012, p. 187) to define Shinehen Buryats’ awareness of belonging to a special community. The Buryat are now well-established citizens among the Mongolian-speaking community of Hulun Buir. They feel rooted in the Hulun Buir grasslands and view their *ovoos* and related rituals as an integral part of their heritage and culture. At the same time, Russia, as the ancestral homeland, is still part of the Buryats’ collective memory: the recently opened borderlands between Russia and China have allowed Buryat people to meet again. Over the last fifteen years, some Shinehen Buryats have “gone back” to Russia, especially in Ulan-Ude in Buryatia, where they have tried to reconnect with their Buryat peers. Many Buryats from Russia also come to Hulun Buir where they have connections with their counterparts, renowned for having kept intact their “traditions”. Some Buryats say that soon clan *ovoos* will reappear in Hulun Buir, making them an ever more numerous feature of the sacred landscape.

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## NOTES

1. According to the 2010 Russian national census, the Buryats number around four hundred sixty thousand people. In Mongolia, they are approximately forty-five thousand. In China, they number around eight thousand people, although there are no official statistics because they are part of the “Mongol ethnic group”.

2. Shinehen is the main river of the area allotted to the Buryat refugees when they settled in China. The river and its adjacent area later became known as the territory of the Buryats. Indeed, when Buryats from China meet Buryats from Russia or Mongolia, they often introduce themselves as “Shinehen Buryats”.

3. Although called a “municipality”, a large part of Hulun Buir remains rural. Hulun Buir was governed as a league (Mo. *aimag*; Ch. *meng* 盟) until 2001.

4. The People's Republic of China officially recognizes fifty-six "ethnic groups" or "nationalities" (Ch. *minzu* 民族): the Han Chinese make up more than 90% of the total population, while the other fifty-five are "ethnic minority groups" mainly living in peripheral areas of the country.
5. In traditional Buryat food, a multi-layered cake filled with jam (Bu. *nagamal*) and Buryat dumplings (Mo., Bu. *Buriyad buuz*; Ch. *Buliyate baozi* 布里亚特包子) are well-known delicacies. They are homemade and are sold in small Buryat shops and restaurants. In this paper, I use a phonetic transliteration close to the pronunciation of the local dialect.
6. *Yamen* was a generic term referring to central and local government offices in imperial China, including ministries. In this paper, *yamen* will explicitly designate the Hulun Buir government office during the Republican era (1912-1949).
7. The *gachaa* (Mongolian term) is the smallest administrative unit of the modern Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and corresponds to residential and pastoral areas.
8. In the People's Republic of China, the Khamnigan are today part of the "Evenki ethnic group" (Ch. *Ewenke minzu* 鄂温克民族). They number around two thousand people.
9. Tuguldur Toboev is the author of the "Past history of Khori and Aga Buryats", the most well-known chronicle of Khori and Aga history compiled in 1863 (see Toboev 1996).
10. Many Buryat families used to send one of their sons to monasteries to become lamas. Although the Tibetan language was privileged for its religious value, the Buryat monasteries were also crucial institutions for expanding the use of the Mongolian script (Chakars 2014, p. 31).
11. According to one lama of the Shinehen Monastery, two hundred to three hundred lamas are believed to have crossed the border.
12. Between 1900 and 1925, many Khori and Aga Buryat families fled to the northeastern provinces of Hentii and Dornod in order to escape Russia's ongoing wars (Buyandelger 2013, p. 59).
13. Known in the collective memory as the most prestigious Daur Amban, Gui Fu was in reality the vice-governor of Hulun Buir in 1919 and then its governor in 1920.
14. The "Daur ethnic group" (Ch. *Dawo'er minzu* 达斡尔民族) today form one of the fifty-five "ethnic minority groups" recognized by the People's Republic of China. They number around 132 000 people according to the last Chinese census (2010).
15. The anthropologist David Sneath notes that the groups which were incorporated into the Manchu banner system have generally retained clans. Rather than imposing an aristocracy whose members all belonged to the same clan, the Manchu banner system institutionalized the existing clan units by making them part of the banner administration (Sneath 2000, p. 204).
16. The great Manchurian pneumonic plague of 1910-1911 was a disease transmitted to man by the *tarbagan* (*Marmota sibirica*), a marmot found in northeast China, Mongolia and Transbaikalia Siberia. In China, the plague first appeared in the border town of Manzhouli 满洲里, which is situated approximately 200 km from Hailar City. The animal was hunted by the Mongols, the Tungus, the Cossacks and Chinese workers from Shandong province for its fur, fat and flesh in order to satisfy the growing demand of the fur market at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Farrar 1912, p. 4). The great Manchurian plague was the most devastating human epidemic in modern Chinese history causing 60 000 deaths (Lynteris 2013, p. 305).
17. The Ninth Panchen Lama travelled extensively in Inner Mongolia, where he conducted various religious ceremonies. In the fall of 1929, the Panchen Lama was in the different *sums* of Hulun Buir. In 1931, he was appointed a member of the Nanjing government, received a subsidy of 0,5 million dollars and went to Hailar City (Kuzmin 2015, pp. 130-131).
18. After the Sino-Soviet conflict of 1929, some Buryat families moved to what is today Shiliin Gol League under the leadership of Rinchindorzh, a local leader. Rinchindorzh asked for protection from the Panchen Lama. The latter agreed to help; and thanks to his religious authority, the Buryats were given access to pasturelands in Shiliin Gol by the local nobles (Konagaya 2016, p. 150).

19. Another version of the ovoos story collected by A. Hürelbaatar says that the Han Uul Ovoos was offered by the reincarnated lama Tangrin Gegen of the Shinehen Monastery (Hürelbaatar 2000, p. 110).
20. The pictures and movie are kept in the Lindgren Collection at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, United Kingdom.
21. The master spirits of the land may be ancestor spirits or mountain/water divinities, etc., depending on the area and local people. Among the Buryats, the master spirits of the land may be both, as noted by Humphrey: “Deceased shamans ‘become cliffs’ (*xada*). A *xada* is also said to be the son or daughter of a sky. How a spirit can be both a deceased human and a child of a sky is not explained [...] landscapes are not coherent and invariant structures applicable on all occasions, but ways of thinking and speaking in particular contexts” (Humphrey 1995, p. 151).
22. The features of and the material used for ovoos construction are diverse. I refer here to the ovoos of Hulun Buir, which are mainly made of cairns and willow branches.
23. This practice of burying a sacred object bears similarity to the Tibetan *sa chog*, a Buddhist ritual performed before the construction of a temple or a house. In the Tibetan ritual, a treasure vase is inserted into the ground and covered with soil (Gardner 2006).
24. The “Open up the West” policy was launched in 2001 to encourage economic growth in the peripheral and ethnic minorities regions of the country.
25. Clan members are asked to contribute within their financial means in the form of money and/or sheep.
26. The ovoos chief is often a respected and knowledgeable male member of the clan. Unless he is retired, someone working in the government is not allowed to hold this function.
27. Many people remember that some ten to fifteen years ago, everyone arrived on horseback.
28. This is the “act of calling the essence of the fortune called *dallaga*” (Davaa-Ochir 2008, p. 53).
29. In contrast to other Mongols, most of the Horchin arrived in Hulun Buir in the 1960s.
30. These tensions mainly revolve around pasturelands. Furthermore, ethnic rebellions that pitched various groups against each other in the 1930s and afterwards are still remembered, especially among the Buryats and the Solon.
31. Foreigners are usually welcomed. They are asked to follow the rules. So, a female researcher working on ovoos rituals is not allowed to climb to the ovoos, as with the local women.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article explores the relationship between ovoos construction and the parallel political recognition of Buryat refugees in Hulun Buir (Inner Mongolia). More precisely, it analyses how these sacred cairns and their annual rituals have served as symbols of Buryat territorial appropriation throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considering the ovoos as a support for local history, the article illustrates the way ovoos construction links territory, politics and identity in this multi-ethnic area.

Cet article explore la relation entre la construction d’ovoos et la reconnaissance politique parallèle des réfugiés bouriates à Hulun Buir (Mongolie-Intérieure). Plus précisément, il analyse comment ces cairns sacrés et leurs rituels annuels ont servi de symboles dans l’appropriation territoriale des Bouriates au cours du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle. Envisageant les ovoos comme un support de l’histoire locale,

cet article illustre la façon dont la construction d'ovoos lie territoire, politique et identité dans cette région multi-ethnique.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Inner Mongolia, Buryat, territory, identity, migration, politics, sacred site

**Mots-clés:** Mongolie-Intérieure, Bouriate, territoire, identité, migration, politique, site sacré

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