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# Sacred Cairns (Ovoo) in the Mongolian Cultural World

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## Summary

The word *ovoo* means “heap” or “pile” in Mongolian. The *ovoo* are highly significant features of Inner Asia’s sacred landscape and are present in Mongolian-speaking areas (Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia), as well as in Turkic-speaking Tuva. Depending on the area and the immediate environment in which they are erected, the *ovoo* have various features, from simple round heaps of stones and branches to more elaborate structures, such as a circular mound of stones with a central pole topped with brushwood and decorated with prayer flags and/or colored ribbons. Built by local people for centuries, the *ovoo* serve as territorial markers and ritual altars. *Ovoo* found on ritually significant mountains are worshipped annually by a given social group (people from the same village [*sum*], a clan, an ethnic group, etc.) to propitiate the various divinities of the land, ensuring protection and prosperity. Like other ritual activities, *ovoo* worship was banned in Mongolia, China, and Russia as a result of communist antireligious policies. In the early 21st century, *ovoo* worship constitutes a revived religious practice in all three countries and has drawn the attention of politicians and scholars.

**Keywords:** sacred cairns, territory, ritual, homeland, ethnic group, politics, Mongolia, China, Russia

**Subjects:** China, Ethnohistory, Indigenous Studies (except the Americas), Religion

## Meaning, Features, and Origins of Ovoo throughout the Mongolian Cultural World

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*Ovoo* are cairns found in various parts of Inner Asia, ranging from Mongolian-speaking areas in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia (People’s Republic of China), Kalmykia, and Buryatia (Russian Federation) to Turkic-speaking Tuva (Russian Federation). They are features inherent to the Mongolian sacred landscape.<sup>1</sup> The term *ovoo* means “pile” or “heap” in Mongolian. The spelling and pronunciation vary according to the locality: *ovoo* is the transliteration of the Cyrillic version used in Mongolia, *obo/oboo* (*oboga* in classical script) is in use in Inner Mongolia, and *ovaa* is used in Russia. In Tibet and Qinghai, cairns similar to *ovoo* are known as *lab tse*.

*Ovoo* also refer to mountains in both the geological and cosmological sense, including “masters” with whom humans are in a relationship.<sup>2</sup> The *ovoo* can be loci of sacred power offering safety to passing travelers, but they also serve as territorial markers and/or altars for the divinities of the land. They are commonly worshipped by local societies to ensure protection, prosperity, and the fertility of the flock.

The features of an ovoo depend on the territory and surrounding environment in which they are built (figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). They may only consist of heaps of stones or branches in a conical shape. The most common structure is round and conical: A circular mound of stones (generally with a central pole) is topped with brushwood and decorated with prayer flags and/or colored ribbons. Stone is a sturdy and long-lasting material that symbolizes strength and stability in the Mongol tradition.<sup>3</sup> Branches are believed to be favorable dwelling places for deities, while the prayer flags refer to the concept of collective good fortune. Those ovoo associated strongly with Buddhism are built in three stages and have twelve smaller heaps extending out in the cardinal directions around them, imitating the continents around Mt. Sumeru, the world mountain in Buddhist cosmology.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1.** An ovoo on the road from Choibalsan to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2015.

Source: Photograph by Aurore Dumont.



**Figure 2.** An ovoo, Inner Mongolia, China, 2016.

Source: Photograph by Aurore Dumont.



**Figure 3.** An ovoo near Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2015.

*Source:* Photograph by Aurore Dumont.



**Figure 4.** A clan ovoo, Inner Mongolia, China, 2016.

*Source:* Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

Some cairns are built to memorialize the sites of important events and eminent individuals in Mongol history (figure 5).



**Figure 5.** A memorial ovoo, Inner Mongolia, China, 2017.

*Source:* Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

The sizes of ovoo vary from a few feet to several yards high to large and elaborate structures that may reach several meters high, in particular at major ritual sites and in tourist camps (figure 6).



**Figure 6.** An ovoo on a touristic camp, Inner Mongolia, China, 2016.

Source: Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

Ovoo are intrinsically linked to the mountains, which are believed to host powerful spirits and masters. In the Mongolian language, the words *ovoo* and *uul* (mountain) refer to the physical object and the deities that inhabit those places, and Mongolian authors often do not distinguish between the physical object and the local deity.<sup>5</sup> The peoples of Inner Asia perceive their natural environment as a coherent whole made up of natural and supernatural entities. The ecosystem, the climate, the mountains, the pasturelands, the humans, and the animals are all complementary to various local and ancestral spirits occupying the sacred landscape. According to an emic conception, every entity is accredited with energies and beneficial power that can be reinforced by ritualized human actions.<sup>6</sup> Built on top of ritually significant mountains, ovoo cairns represent auspicious sites for worshipping mountains and connecting people with their environment. Ovoo cairns are often erected on elevated ground and in wild territory free of human construction; the preference for a high position expresses the desire to overlook a natural world domesticated by man.<sup>7</sup> The high elevation may also be related to practices of disposing the dead on high ground and worshipping tall mountains and trees, as well as the belief that high places are the dwellings of the local gods.<sup>8</sup> Another type of ovoo is also found along roads, passes,



or near sacred springs. They are situated at points of mandatory passage and water crossings: They have to be “visited” by travelers whenever they cross.<sup>9</sup> Sacred cairns are often named after a mountain, a hill, or the clan that worships it.<sup>10</sup>

The origin and religious complexion of ovoo remain unclear and are still subject to controversy. A common assumption is that the rise of ovoo was concomitant with the second conversion of the Mongols to Tibetan Buddhism in the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>11</sup> This hypothesis is based on the fact that the word *ovoo* and the related worship are not mentioned in early written sources, including *The Secret History of the Mongols*<sup>12</sup>: The term appears only from the second half of the 18th century onward, notably in texts written by Mergen Diyanchi, the Third Mergen Gegeen (1717–1766, monastic name Lubsang-Dambi-Jalsan). In these texts, Mergen Diyanchi incorporates shamanic folk religious elements into Buddhist ritual in order to absorb the cult of the ovoo within the folds of acceptable Tibetan Buddhist ritual praxis. However, the cult of mountain deities is attested in ancient Mongolia<sup>13</sup>: Genghis [Chinggis] Khan himself took refuge on the mountain of Burkhan Khaldun, attributing his survival to the spirit of the mountain.<sup>14</sup> Ovoo may also be related to the ancient monumental tradition of stone mounds documented in central Eurasia since late prehistory<sup>15</sup> and to the stone mounds set up on mountain tops by each clan during the shamanic *tailagan* sacrifices among the West Buryats.<sup>16</sup>

The ovoo have been generally interpreted as shamanist cult objects or an embodiment of Lamaist convention.<sup>17</sup> In the early 21st century, ovoo worship is organized under the patronage of a lama or shaman, depending on the ethnic group concerned.

### Ovoo as Territorial Markers

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One of the primary functions of ovoo is to mark out the territory and its various material and symbolic boundaries. Most of the landmark ovoo were not worshipped, but the most outstanding ones have become the subjects of annual cults. From the mid-18th century on, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) required Mongol banner princes to produce maps reporting the geographical situation of the banners they ruled<sup>18</sup> to the Court of Territorial Affairs (*Lifanyuan* 理藩院). The boundaries of league and banners were generally marked out by ovoo, and the name of each boundary ovoo was inscribed on the rock.<sup>19</sup> Ovoo were also used to mark the border with Russia and internal boundaries inside Mongolia.<sup>20</sup> However, depending on the area, boundaries were not always indicated by ovoo marks on the maps: In the eastern part of Outer Mongolia, norms for map making and boundary reports were more strictly adhered to than in the western areas, where natural features such as mountains or rivers were used as landmarks.<sup>21</sup> Ovoo also served to delineate pasturelands: Pastures near mountains and rivers could use these features as boundaries, while pastures lacking such distinctive topography might employ cairns.<sup>22</sup> In conflicts over land, which occurred more frequently with the creation of administrative banners into which people were incorporated from the 17th century,<sup>23</sup> ovoo cairns aided in resolving boundary conflicts by establishing and indicating borders.<sup>24</sup> Each year, banner officials were required to check that the ovoo were in place and that their location corresponded to their position on the banner maps.<sup>25</sup>

Landmark ovoo not only marked the boundaries between various administrative territories and between pastures but also legitimized the use of pasturelands—a critical prerequisite for pastoralists. A relevant example may be the case of those Buryats who fled from Russia to China at the beginning of the 20th century and built several ovoo in Chinese territory. In order to escape Soviet repression, some rich Buryat herders and lamas from the Cis-Baikal and Transbaikalian regions in Russia started crossing the border with their livestock in 1918 to settle in Mongolia and China. Having received an official agreement from the Hulun Buir government office (*yamen* 衙門) for permanent settlement, the Buryats were allotted a Buryat banner in 1922 and erected new ovoo that made the legitimacy of their land usage under the patronage of the local government physically manifest. Waves of Buryat migration were punctuated by the construction of new ovoo cairns, thus linking groups of people to their new territory and legitimizing their right to use pasturelands.<sup>26</sup> In this case, ovoo were also occupation markers, stating “We are here.”<sup>27</sup>

As part of the traditional system of spatial knowledge of nomadic local societies, ovoo cairns have also been used as orientation marks for travelers, indicating important spots and/or dangerous areas.

### Ovoo as Sacred Cairns

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The most common and numerous ovoo found in the Mongolian cultural world in the early 21st century are sacred cairns that are subject to regular worship. They may be called by the name of the mountain on which they are built, often bearing prestigious appellations like “ovoo of the holy mountain” (*Bogda uul ovoo*). They may also be named after an administrative unit (a banner, a village, etc.), a monastery, or a clan. Since the mid-18th century, ovoo have been built according to the strict hierarchy inherited from the Qing mode of governance, one that stretches from top-banner ovoo worshipped by high officials and their subjects down to village (*sum*) ovoo and patrilineal clan-based ovoo worshipped by the members of a given clan.<sup>28</sup> For example, among the Chahar Mongols living in the 1940s in southern Chahar Province<sup>29</sup> in Inner Mongolia (about 75 miles from Kalgan, today the city of Zhangjiakou 張家口), ovoo were associated with particular kin groups. Two ovoo were located on the hills north of the village: one belonged to people who bore the surname of Hangin (the “Hangin ovoo”), while the other belonged to those with the surname Borjigit (the “Borjigit ovoo”). Since any male named Hangin or Borjigit could attend worship at the ovoo bearing his surname, these ovoo belonged to extended patrilineal kin groups known as *törel*.<sup>30</sup> Patrilineal ovoo are situated next to the summer and winter pastures used by families for their herds. In this case, the ovoo is also a means for identifying different patrilineal groups on a given territory.

Apart from these cairns, the Mongolian sacred landscape accommodates other types of ovoo. Monasteries are often dotted with their own ovoo regularly worshipped by local lamas. Some ovoo near or over rivers are especially made for the worship of water/dragon-spirits (*luus*) and are called “ovoo of water/dragon spirits” (*luus-un ovoo*). Finally, in the Hulun Buir municipality among the shamanist Solon, Khamnigan, and Daur peoples, one can find numerous “shaman ovoo” (*shaman u ovoo*) built besides the graves of deceased shamans. This short list is not exhaustive; other specific types of ovoo may be found all over the Mongolian cultural world.

All these sacred cairns serve as altars for worshipping the numerous deities “inhabiting” the landscape. Each ovoo and community possess their own entities, comprised of various master spirits of the land (*gazar-in ezen*), water/dragon divinities (*luus*) believed to have abundant wealth, and shamanic ancestor spirits (*ongon*).<sup>31</sup> There are different local varieties of interpretation for territorial divinities,<sup>32</sup> and local people propitiate the deities of their homeland in order to obtain favor, such as abundant pastures, human and herd fertility, the well-being of the community, and protection against calamities. The deities represent the idea of mastering the natural environment and thus have different functions or responsibilities, from protecting worshippers from bad luck to looking after their herds and bringing wealth.

The construction of ovoo had to (and still has to) follow precise rules. Ovoo are generally erected on high ground and in territory free of human construction (see figure 7). Serving as a receptacle for local deities, the ovoo site is always carefully chosen in accordance with the locality and its natural and supernatural features. A well-known written source related to the construction of ovoo dates from the mid-18th century and is entitled *A Manual on Ovoo Construction (Oboga bosqaqu yosun-u jerge)*. It is part of the fourth volume of *The Collected Works of Mergen Diyanchi Lama (Vachir dhara mergen diyanchi blama-yin gegen-ü' bum jarlig)*, printed in Beijing between 1780 and 1783. The text, translated by Charles Bawden, suggests that the terrain for ovoo must be rich in mountains, water, trees, and grass:

After the performance of preliminary rites such as the rituals of the earth, the pacification of the lords of the earth, the installation of vases of incense, a circle of radius eight cubits is drawn out: the lowest course of the *obo* comes on this base. On top of this is drawn another circle, of a radius two cubits less, and on this base comes the next course, two cubits thick. The next two courses are planned similarly, one cubit being subtracted from the radius each time, while the thickness of each course is two cubits. The overall measurements of the *obo* of four courses are four fathoms from side to side at the bottom and two fathoms from side to side at the top. The height through the centre is two fathoms. From a good fertile tree, a piece of wood of the dimensions of a man should be prepared to act as a central support. It is to be installed as the supreme part of the shrine [ . . . ] The exterior of the *obo* is to be wrapped in yellow robes, and armour, helmets, knives, clothes, ornaments and such like objects, all sorts of food and fruit, and vessels of use are to be installed, and in between them cloth, jewels, seeds and medicaments should be placed, and then the body of the *ovoo* should be erected solidly out of stone.<sup>33</sup>

For monastery ovoo, lamas first traveled over mountains and through valleys to find an ideal location according to geomantic prescriptions and pragmatic considerations. The southern slopes of mountains or hills were often considered auspicious locations.<sup>34</sup> Ovoo were generally built by a lama or a shaman, depending on the community concerned, and according to auspicious configurations the religious specialist has himself/herself calculated. Texts written by early Mongol scholars in Tibetan (namely two Tibetan manuals about ovoo construction by Ching Sujgt Nomun Khan Lonsangnorbusherab (1701–1768) and his disciple Lobsangtsultim (Blo bzang tshul khirms) are extensively used as practical guides to ovoo construction in present-day Mongolia.<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 7.** Lama marking site for the construction of the Bayan Khan ovoo among the Buryats of Inner Mongolia on June 27, 1931.

Source: Photograph © The Lindgren Collection <<https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/photographs/314609>>, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

While some ovoo are believed to have existed for centuries, some others were destroyed, moved, and sometimes rebuilt elsewhere. Different reasons may explain the act of destroying and/or moving an ovoo. It may be related to the master spirits of the land. If these spirits feel unhappy in a location, the ovoo may be moved to a more appropriate site under the guidance of a religious specialist. Disasters, dry weather, and livestock disease may be interpreted as the result of an ovoo being in an unsuitable position, provoking the wrath of the deities.<sup>36</sup> Conflicts, wars, and changes in political regime may also have an influence on the existence of an ovoo. During troubled times, an ovoo can collapse and be rebuilt in another location. During the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931–1945), several ovoo belonging to different ethnic groups were destroyed on purpose, depriving local people of their sacred cairns for years. Some of these ovoo were rebuilt in the same place or moved to another location. In local narratives, the date and circumstances of the construction of an ovoo may be forgotten, misremembered, or entirely reformulated in a mythic guise.<sup>37</sup>

## Ovoo Worship

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Annual ovoo worship was and still is an important event in the social life and political organization of Mongol communities. Under the Qing dynasty, every ovoo banner organized a ceremony at which the ruling princes and other important officials gathered (figure 8). This was a major public ritual where different social spheres could demonstrate authority, respect, or allegiance according to their rank in the hierarchy.



**Figure 8.** Solon people wait to greet the governor general the day before worship at the Bayan Khoshuu Banner ovoo, Inner Mongolia, June 21, 1931.

Source: Photograph © The Lindgren Collection, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Ovoo worship mainly consisted in appropriating local deities by praying, making offerings, and other ritual gestures at the ovoo site with the guidance of a lama or shaman. The cult was always followed by the “three manly games” (*naadam*): horse racing, wrestling, and archery.<sup>38</sup> The ovoo cult and the manly games were aimed at obtaining the deities’ favor and protection over the coming months.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the political reconfiguration of northern Asia, ovoo worship was threatened at different periods of time. After the creation of the Mongolian People’s Republic in 1921, religious activities were placed under strict control. With the first wave of

persecution against Buddhist clergy between 1929 and 1932, reincarnation activities in temples and monasteries were forbidden, while many lamas were executed and hundreds of monasteries and objects of worship, including ovoo cairns, were destroyed. Some families fled to China (Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Xinjiang), where religious activities were still allowed. The repressions and purges carried out in Mongolia in the late 1930s followed those in Russia. In Kalmykia and Buryatia, all places of worship were closed and shamans were arrested. The years of the Republic of China (1912–1949) were quite favorable to religious practices, and ovoo worship was observed by travelers and ethnographers<sup>39</sup> across the entire country. After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the antireligious campaigns launched by the new communist regime were modeled on the Soviet exemplar: Monasteries and ovoo were destroyed, and lamas and shamans were forbidden to practice their religious activities. Violence against religious specialists and the destruction of religious sites reached a peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Following the reform era from the mid-1980s onward in China and the fall of the USSR in Mongolia and Russia, locals started building and worshipping ovoo again. The revival of ovoo worship after a long period of repression provided new opportunities for native populations to express their cultural traditions.

Contemporary ovoo worship may vary according to locality, but it more or less follows the same pattern. Ovoo worship is held during the summer, from the end of May when the environment is renewed by the growth of green grass, newborns in the herds, and the first milking. The precise date of the ritual is determined by the lama or shaman in accordance with the Mongolian lunar calendar, itself calculated according to the Tibetan astrological system. Most local ovoo have fixed dates of worship according to the lunar calendar. New moon days and forthcoming *luus* days are considered the most auspicious dates for worshipping an ovoo. The worship date of banner and state ovoo are chosen by local astrologers. In Mongolia, worship<sup>40</sup> at the state Altan ovoo was held on July 31, 2008, an auspicious *luus* day (the twenty-ninth day of the last moon of the summer, according to the traditional calendar).<sup>41</sup> For banner and state ovoo worship, special funds are allotted by the local or state government. For village and clan ovoo, the money is collected by the ovoo leader from among his community. In both cases, the collected funds are used mostly to pay the religious specialist, buy offerings, and pay out awards to the winners of the *naadam*. The number of worshippers may vary from a dozen people attending a family ovoo to thousands of people at an official state ovoo.

Early in the morning on the day of the ritual, worshippers, dressed brightly in their traditional costumes (*deel*),<sup>42</sup> gather at the ovoo site. Men, women, and children arrive by foot, car, motorcycle, or on horseback at the bottom of the mountain. People activate ordered ritual techniques and behavior to contact the spirits of the land. During ovoo worship, people have to behave correctly and refrain from damaging the natural environment.

When the worshippers arrive on site, they place some of their offerings next to the ovoo or directly on the altar. Offerings vary depending on the territory concerned, but are generally related to food habits, including “white products” (milk, cheese), candies, cakes, “black products” (alcohol: usually vodka in Russia and Mongolia, *baijiu*<sup>43</sup> 白酒 in China), “red products” (lamb, beef, horse meat,<sup>44</sup> depending on the deities' preference), lumps of butter, pure water, and fruit (figures 9 and 10). Banknotes may also be offered. Delighting the deities is aimed

at obtaining their protection and favor in exchange. When people pass near an ovoo, they must offer something to the deities. Even though the offerings are dedicated to the deities, some are consumed by worshippers.



**Figure 9.** Offerings of fruits and cakes at Mergen clan ovoo worship among the Daur people, Inner Mongolia, 2017.

*Source:* Photograph by Aurore Dumont.



**Figure 10.** Offerings of entire sheep at Mergen clan ovoo worship among the Daur people, Inner Mongolia, 2017.

Source: Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

People then start circumambulating clockwise three times around the cairn; in some areas, they “feed” the spirits with food and liquor at the same time. The ovoo is renovated by the men, who reach to the upper part of the cairn to replace the old branches with freshly cut ones<sup>45</sup> and add stones.<sup>46</sup> Just as nature goes through a cycle of renewal, producing green grass, calves, and milk, the ovoo is renewed by these male ritual actions, symbolically ensuring the perpetuation of the male-based group.<sup>47</sup> In traditional Mongol society, women are not allowed to ascend the ovoo cairn or attend the ritual. Furthermore, they rarely compete in the “three manly games.” Mountain worship and its related games are 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 sources of water should remain free of any pollution (i.e., blood). With the revival of ovoo rituals in the 1980s, the presence of women is sometimes tolerated, depending on the ovoo and the community.<sup>48</sup> When the altar and the incense for purifying the deities are ready, the lama starts reading prayers (or the shaman starts performing) for a couple of hours. Throughout the ritual, participants feed the ovoo deities with food and drink while circumambulating clockwise three times around the cairn and kowtowing.<sup>49</sup> For Mongols, circumambulation is an act of respect shown by bodily movement.<sup>50</sup> The worship ends with worshippers gathering for the “act of summoning the essence of fortune” (*dallaga*),



which consists of taking the offerings into their hands and performing a clockwise circular movement, saying “*khurai khurai*,” which means “to reach, to collect.” The *dallaga* offerings are then considered to be blessed and are consumed by the worshippers.

### The “Three Manly Games” (*Naadam*)

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The *naadam* have followed religious ceremonies since at least the 17th century.<sup>51</sup> The word *naadam* first appeared during the Qing dynasty, after the first “Naadam of the Seven Banners” (*Doloon khoshigu naadam*) took place in 1691, when the Khalka swore allegiance to the Qing ruler.<sup>52</sup> The *naadam* went from being a military demonstration, organized each year among the provincial armies, to a ceremony celebrated at sacred mountains three times a year to consecrate the Manchu emperor and his representatives.<sup>53</sup> The communist regimes put an end to ovoo worship and dissociated it from the *naadam* games, which were given an ideological content. In Mongolia after 1924, the national holiday was fixed on July 11, and *naadam* games became “National Holiday Naadam” (*Ulsyn ikh bayar naadam*), celebrating the success of the 1921 Revolution and the achievements of the new state.<sup>54</sup> In the People’s Republic of China, the *naadam* became a symbol of the traditions of the “Mongol ethnic group,” *Menggu minzu* 蒙古民族.

In the 21st century, the *naadam* are still held in the three countries, either separately from ovoo worship or afterward. When the worship is over, the *naadam* are organized in the afternoon on a flat site where a banner, a tribune, and a yurt are set up. The games consist of horse races, wrestling, and archery.<sup>55</sup> Horses are divided into age categories: For example, in Hulun Buir, 2-year-old horses run 4, 4.6, and 6.2 miles, while older horses run 1.86, 3.1, 6.2, or 7.76 miles (figure 11). Although any owner can take part in the races, the horse must belong to a local Mongol breed for reasons of equality.



**Figure 11.** 10,000-meter (6.2-mile) horse race after Uitexen ovoo worship among the Buryat people, Inner Mongolia, 2019.

Source: Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

Wrestling is the most popular of the “three manly games,” and it is the finale of the ritual day (figure 12). The matches, supervised by coaches, are characterized by the absence of weight categories and time limits. In order to win, a wrestler must make his opponent fall or touch the ground.



**Figure 12.** Wrestling after Raisiyan monastery ovoo worship among the Barga people, Inner Mongolia, 2018.

Source: Photograph by Aurore Dumont.

Archery attracts fewer people and is not always organized during the games. The contests end with prizes of money and/or sheep. The use of games during religious ceremonies is based on an expected ritual effect: “The nomads play to make sure the year will be good, the cattle numerous, and the yurt strong.”<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the games have a communicative function, telling the spirits that humans are happy.<sup>57</sup> As with the ovoo worship, the aim of the games is to establish reciprocity with the deities in return for protection and favors.

## Politics

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Since the mid-1990s (and especially since the 2000s), big ovoo (i.e., banner and state ovoo) have received major attention from the authorities. In Mongolia, state ceremonies for sacred mountains and their ovoo are conducted by the president. Thus possessing a highly political character, they form a series of state rituals used from the 1990s as part of the project to build a distinctive national brand of public culture.<sup>58</sup> The various presidents of Mongolia have given eight mountains special status as sites of state worship. Meanwhile, the Mongolian traditional practices of worshipping the sacred sites were included in 2017 on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.<sup>59</sup>

In China, the 2006 inclusion of ovoo worship on China’s national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage has led to negotiations and innovations in different local social and ritual strata. Extending from provincial decision-making to the local interpretation of heritage classification, both members of the indigenous intelligentsia and ordinary people are appropriating ovoo to make them valuable and powerful sacred monuments.<sup>60</sup>

As sacred monuments of the natural environment, ovoo have also been under threat since the turn of the 21st century. Pollution and the mining boom are believed to damage the landscape and the deities who inhabit it. For Mongolian people, the perturbation caused by external factors to the earth, water sources, animals, and mountains is considered a polluting act that may alter the divinities’ behavior and the connection local people have with their homeland.

## Discussion of the Literature

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The first works on ovoo were produced by Mongolists, who mainly focused their research on the ritual texts linked to ovoo worship. One of the earliest pieces of research of this kind was done by the famous linguist and Orientalist Buryat scholar Dorzh Banzarovich Banzarov (1822–1855). In 1846, he published a dissertation at Kazan University on *The Black Faith, or Shamanism among the Mongols*,<sup>61</sup> in which he addressed the importance of the worship of nature and mountains in shamanism and Buddhism. Regarding ovoo, he relied on two texts produced by Mergen Diyanci in the mid-18th century, the first being a manual on the construction of ovoo (*Oboga bosqoqu yosun-u jerge*) and the second a manual for ovoo worship (*Oboga takiqu jang uile unsilga-yin jerge tunggalag cagan sil*).

At the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th, with limited exceptions,<sup>62</sup> ovoo were mostly described in ethnographic works (see “Primary Sources”).

After the rise of the communist regimes, studies on ovoo worship were restricted to western Orientalists and Mongolists, who provided comprehensive studies of the social and religious meaning of ovoo based on different local texts related to ovoo worship and construction.<sup>63</sup>

With the religious revival in the Mongolian cultural world from the mid-1980s and the fall of the Soviet Union, an abundant scientific literature has been devoted to the analysis of ovoo and their worship. Cairn worship could be witnessed afresh in the field, while researchers based in China, Russia, and Mongolia offered new insights on the cairns of their respective countries. Archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, and folklorists have studied ovoo from various perspectives, highlighting the changes and innovations brought by local peoples and governments. Scientific articles on this subject are published mainly in Mongolian, Chinese, and English. In the mid-1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, researchers primarily focused on the origins, history, and meaning<sup>64</sup> of the ovoo, their connection with shamanism and Buddhism,<sup>65</sup> and provided ethnographic accounts of newly rebuilt and worshipped ovoo, paying particular attention to the rituals (their organization, the inventory of local deities, the role of ritual specialists, etc.).<sup>66</sup>

From the late 1990s and mid-2000s on, research has covered the role of the Mongolian and Chinese governments in shaping the discourse on national identity and “minority culture,” as well as the way local people have reappropriated their cairns, which could eventually support local memory and a sense of ethnic belonging.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, numerous collective works sponsored by the governments of Mongolia and China have been published on the ovoo tradition and worship. The ways in which the mining boom and pollution affect the sacred landscape have also been explored.<sup>68</sup> While various issues related to history, politics, and material and immaterial culture have been touched upon since the mid-1980s, the scientific literature on ovoo often remains restricted to a given territory or a specific ovoo, with the exception of a special issue published in 2019;<sup>69</sup> a monograph dealing with ovoo in general has yet to be published.

## Primary Sources

The primary sources relevant to ovoo are quite dispersed and do not appear before the 18th century. Descriptions of ovoo as landmarks are given in 18th-century Chinese administrative sources, in particular in corpora of administrative matters, such as *The Code of Qing Dynasty* (*Da Qing Huidian* 大清會典, Jiaqing and Guangxu edition)<sup>70</sup> and *The Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty* (*Da Qing lichao shilu* 大清歷朝實錄). Additional valuable resources are the maps of the banners of Inner and Outer Mongolia made for the Court of Territorial Affairs (*Lifanyuan* 理藩院) in the late Qing dynasty: These show numerous drawings of ovoo. Some of these maps are available at the Berlin State Library <<https://themen.crossasia.org/mongolische-karten>>.<sup>71</sup> At the beginning of the 19th century, more attention was given to the description of ovoo and their worship. These were part of broader ethnographic descriptions of local daily life and religious practices by European, Japanese, and American travelers, ethnographers, and missionaries operating in various Mongolian territories.<sup>72</sup> Chinese officials and travelers also left numerous local gazettes (*difangzhi* 地方志) and travel accounts (*youji* 遊記).<sup>73</sup>

## Links to Digital Materials

Cross Asia database [<https://crossasia.org/en/resources/crossasia-search/>](https://crossasia.org/en/resources/crossasia-search/)

Flickr account with numerous photographs of ovoo <https://www.flickr.com/search/?text=ovoo>

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology database <https://collections.maa.cam.ac.uk/>

Oscar Mamen archive and blog <https://www.oscarmamen.com/>

## Further Reading

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### Notes

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4. Christopher Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 414.
5. Jared Lindahl, "The Ritual Veneration of Mongolia's Mountains," in *Tibetan Ritual*, ed. Jose Ignacio Cabezon (Oxford: Oxford Unity Press, 2010), 230.
6. Caroline Humphrey, "Chiefly and Shamanist Landscapes in Mongolia," in *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, ed. Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 137.
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9. Yves Dorémieux, "Mongolian Geography as a Discourse on Land-Related Rights," in *Acts of the International Symposium on Dialogue among Civilizations* (Ulaanbaatar, 2002), 1.
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14. Magdalena Tatár, "Two Mongol Texts Concerning the Cult of the Mountains," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungarie* 30, no. 1 (1976): 3–4.
15. Dal Zovo, "Ovoo-Cairns," 1
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18. Caroline Humphrey, "Mongolian Map-Making as Practice  [<https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2021.1880238>](https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2021.1880238)," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 46, no. 3 (2021): 244.
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21. Futaki Hiroshi, "A Description of Boundary Reports (*Nutug-un Cese*) Written in Outer Mongolia in the 1920s," in *Landscapes Reflected in Old Mongolian Maps*, ed. Futaki Hiroshi and Akira Kamimura (Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2005), 29–30.
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25. Charleux, "Ovoos on Late Qing Dynasty," 19
26. Aurore Dumont, "Community, Faith and Politics: The Ovoos of the Shinehen Buryats throughout the 20th Century <<https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.5072>>," *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines* 52 (2021): 7.
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28. Aurore Dumont, "Turning Indigenous Sacred Sites into Intangible Heritage: Authority Figures and Ritual Appropriation in Inner Mongolia," *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (2021): 20–21.
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30. Herbert Harold Vreeland, *Mongol Community and Kinship Structure* (New Haven, CT: Hraf Press, 1962), 180.
31. According to an emic conception, a shaman's ancestor becomes an *ongon* spirit three years after death.
32. Davaa-Ochir Ganzorig, "Oboo Worship: The Worship of Earth and Water Divinities in Mongolia" (master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2008), 32.
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36. Wang Xun 王迅 and Suhebalu 苏赫巴鲁 <<https://www.google.fr/search?hl=fr&tbo=p&tbn=bks&q=inauthor:%22%E8%8B%8F%E8%B5%AB%E5%B7%B4%E9%B2%81%22>>, *Menggu zu fengsuzhi 蒙古族风俗志* [The Customs of the Mongols] (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu xueyuan chubanshe, 1990), 110.
37. Christopher Evans and Caroline Humphrey, "History, Timelessness and the Monumental: The Oboos of the Mergen Environs, Inner Mongolia," *Cambridge Anthropological Journal* 13, no. 2 (2003): 195.
38. For a detailed analysis of *naadam*, see Iwona Kabzińska-Stawarz, *Games of Mongolian Shepherds* (Warsaw, Poland: Institute of the History of Material Culture, Polish Academy of Sciences, 1991).
39. See, for instance, Arthur Lewis Pollard-Urquhart, "An Obo Festival of Western Sunit," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 24, no. 3 (1937): 454–467.
40. Note that state worship is only held in Mongolia and aims to represent the Mongol nation.

41. Davaa-Ochir, "Oboo Worship," 112–113.
42. The *deel* is a long Mongolian dress worn by both men and women fastened under the right shoulder.
43. *Baijiu* is a strong spirit containing 40 to 60 percent alcohol and distilled from sorghum grains.
44. The offering of slaughtered animals also varies. In northeastern Inner Mongolia, some groups offer sheep heads, while others prefer to offer the whole body. In Arkhangai Province, herders have the habit of leaving horse skulls in significant high places and on ovoo: Charlotte Marchina, Sébastien Lepetz, Claude Salicis, and Jérôme Magail, "The Skull on the Hill: Anthropological and Osteological Investigation of Contemporary Horse Skull Ritual Practices in Central Mongolia (Arkhangai Province) <https://doi.org/10.5252/az2017n2a3>," *Anthropozoologica* 52, no. 2 (2017): 171–183.
45. The renovation of ovoo is sometimes done the day before the worship or very early in the morning before the worship starts.
46. Adding stones may be perceived as an act of engagement with the landscape: Charleux and Smith, "Introduction," 2
47. "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" (Caroline Humphrey and Urgunge Onon, *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Daur Mongols* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], 152).
48. Dumont, "Community, Faith," 18.
49. Dumont, "Oboo Sacred Monuments," 208.
50. Davaa-Ochir, "Oboo Worship," 53.
51. Atwood, *Encyclopedia*, 396.
52. Xing Li, 邢莉, "Mengguzu nadamu de bianqian 蒙古族那達慕的變遷" [Changes and Variations in the Mongolian Naadam], *Zhongyang minzu daxue xuebao* 5, no. 34 (2007): 94.
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55. Every region and locality has its own way of organizing naadam: Other competitions may be added (camel racing or female wrestling, for instance).
56. Roberte Hamayon, *Jouer: Étude anthropologique à partir d'exemples Sibériens* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012), 150.
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58. David Sneath, "Nationalising Civilisational Resources: Sacred Mountains and Cosmopolitical Ritual in Mongolia," *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 4 (2014): 460.
59. For more information, see the official site: UNESCO <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/mongolian-traditional-practices-of-worshipping-the-sacred-sites-00871>.
60. Aurore Dumont, "Turning Indigenous," 19.
61. Dorji Banzarov, "The Black Faith, or Shamanism among the Mongols," trans. Jan Nattier and John R. Krueger, *Mongolian Studies* 7 (1981): 53–91. The original version of the work has never been formally published, but it was reprinted in Banzarov's collected works, edited by G. N. Potatin in 1891: Черная вѣра <https://www.sudoc.abes.fr/>



- [cbs/DB=2.1/SET=2/TTL=2/CLK?IKT=1016&TRM=%D0%A7%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%8F+%D0%B2%D1%A3%D1%80%D0%B0>](#) : или шаманство у монголовъ и другія статьи Дорджи Банзарова: (съ портретомъ и биографіей) [The Black Faith, or Shamanism among the Mongols and Other Articles by Dorzh Banzarov: (with Portrait and Biography)], ed. Г. Н. Потанина (Санктпетербургъ: Тип. Императорской акад. Наук, 1891).
62. See Kagaraov, “Монгольские ‘обо’ и их этнографические параллели” [Mongol “Ovoos” and Their Ethnographic Parallels], *Сборник музея антропологии и этнографии*, no. 6 (1927): 115–124.
63. Bawden, “Two Mongol Texts,” 23–41; Magdalena Tatár, “Zur Fragen des Obo-Kultes bei den Mongolen,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 24, no. 30 (1971): 301–330; and Tatár, “Two Mongol Texts Concerning,” 1–58.
64. Chuluu and Stuart, “Rethinking the Mongol Oboo,” 544–554; Liu Wensuo 刘文锁 and Wang Lei 王磊, “Aobao jisi de qiyuan” 敖包祭祀的起源 [The Origin of Oboo Worship] *Xiyu yanjiu*, no. 2 (2006): 76–82; and Ksenia Gerasimova, “De la signification du nombre 13 dans le culte des obo,” *Études Mongoles* 12, (1981): 163–175.
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68. Rebecca Watters, “The Middle of the Story: Ovoos and the Ecological Imagination in Mongolian Conservation <https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.5194>,” *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines* 52 (2021): 1–18; and Bolor Lkhaajav, “Dilemma of the Sacred Lands: Preserving Mongolia’s Ovoos; Amid Mongolia’s Mining Boom, Cultural Sites Such as Ovoos (Cairns) Need Special Protection <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/dilemma-of-the-sacred-lands-preserving-mongolias-ovoos/>,” *Diplomat*, May 6, 2022.

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72. See, for instance, Douglas Carruthers and Jack Miller Humphrey, *Unknown Mongolia: A Record of Travel and Exploration in North-West Mongolia and Dzungaria* <<http://www.sudoc.abes.fr/DB=2.1/SET=1/TTL=1/CLK?IKT=1016&TRM=Unknown+Mongolia>> (London: Hutchinson, 1913) <<http://www.sudoc.abes.fr/DB=2.1/SET=16/TTL=1/CLK?IKT=1018&TRM=Hutchinson>>; James Gilmour, *Among the Mongols* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1883); Henning Haslund Christensen, *Men and Gods in Mongolia*, trans. from Swedish (London: Trench, Trubner, 1935); Henning Haslund Christensen, *A Mongolian Journey*, trans. from Swedish (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1949); Owen Lattimore, *Mongol Journeys* (New York: Doubleday Doran <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubleday\\_Doran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doubleday_Doran)>, 1941); and Pollard-Urquhart, “Obo Festival,” 454–467; Aleksei Matveevich Pozdneev, *Mongolia and the Mongols*, vol. II, trans. W. Dougherty (Bloomington, Indiana: Mouton, 1977).
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