Some Remarks on Ovoo Worship among the Dariganga Mongols

Abstract

In result of an anthropological long-term fieldwork among the Dariganga Mongols, I discussed in the paper some theoretical approaches to the cult of the Earth. The ovoo (in English literature often written as obo, ‘cairn’) worship is one of the most well-known religious practices in Mongolian communities across Inner Asia, but some of its aspects still remain unclear in the academic literature. For example, I distinguish the term ovoo as having three different meanings: a) supernatural entities, b) sacred mountains, and c) altar facilities in eastern Mongolia. Some urban inhabitants criticize the ovoo worship as useless, while majority of Mongols continue to worship the Earth. I stressed some extreme cases of the Halzan ovoo in the recent years in the context of the interrelationship of culture and nature. As a consequence, I regard the supernatural entities, which Mongols call tengers, as playing important role for the local community. The ovoo worship, such as the county ovoo, is formally supported by the state. Therefore, ovoo worship is interconnected with the concept of homeland.

Keywords: Mongolia, ovoo worship, Halzan county ovoo, Tenger, animism, punishment, propitiation, homeland

Introduction

“What women must not climb to the top of a mountain because of a new regulation,” – every woman arriving in front of the Mount Halzan was warned by some men. Women wondered who introduced this new custom. They were informed that the lamas forbid women to ascend the Halzan Mountain. As a result, most women, who would have liked to make a pilgrimage to the mountain peak, unwillingly stayed at the foot of the
mountain. The small dispute occurred last summer in the Sükhbaatar province, southeastern Mongolia, where I did fieldwork over sixteen months among the Darigangas. Dariganga people, an ethnic group of Mongols, inhabits mainly six counties of the southern part of the Sükhbaatar province, namely Asgat, Bayandelger, Dariganga, Naran, Halzan, and Ongon.

In this paper, I will use my data from the Halzan county to describe some aspects of the ovoo worship. In fact the ovoo worship is one of the heated social issues, and one of the well-known religious practices in modern Mongolia. For example, in the present day, some intellectuals and inhabitants of urban areas strongly criticize the ovoo worship as superstitious practice. According to them, the revival of the ovoo worship retreats to the dark period (haranhui üye) from before the dramatic socialist transformation in the last century. On the contrary, the ovoo worship is still essential activity for many Mongols, in particular in the rural areas where people are related closely to nature.

Today Mongols divide ovoo into two types: state ovoo or more precisely ‘ovoo of state offering’ (törin tahilgatai ovoo), and local ovoo or ‘ovoo of local offering’ (oron nutgiin tahilgatai ovoo). Currently, ten sacred mountains are worshipped on national level under the auspices of the President of Mongolia, while several hundred ovoos are worshipped by local people. In fact, none of the twenty-one provinces of Mongolia worships sacred mountain at a provincial level at present. Local ovoos are worshipped at a lower level of the province such as county, district and so on. Sławoj Szynkiewicz divides local Mongolian community into four levels such as a) group camping together, b) the community of one valley, c) the former county and the present unit, and d) the former banner and the present county. I will describe the main sacred mountain of the Halzan county, because it can represent the county ovoo, the largest ovoo of the local community in contemporary Mongolia.

The Mount Halzan, 1153 m, is a hill with a gentle slope looking similarly to other small mountains of the semi-deserted steppe, but it is the most sacred mountain in the surrounding area. Local people have worshipped it for hundred years. The elderly say that they heard how the Mount Halzan was a main sacred mountain of the unit of the Western horse of Dariganga Pasture during the Qing Empire. When the unit was transformed to a county system in 1925, the county borrowed the name Halzan (‘bald’) from its sacred mountain. Even though the ceremony of the mountain worship was temporarily forbidden by the party (MPRP) during the socialist times, the believers made a secret pilgrimage to the Mount Halzan. When Mongolia was transformed into a democratic system, the believers restored the ceremony of the Halzan Mountain worship as a county ovoo (sumyn ovoo) – worship of the main sacred mountain of the county. Actually, the Halzan ovoo worship became the official duty of the county governor. As a consequence, mainly local leaders organized the Halzan ovoo worship apart from lamas’ religious activities during the year.

1 Szynkiewicz 1992: 25.
A retrospective outlook on ovoo

At the beginning of my paper I would like to clarify better the term ovoo. It is referred to as obo or oboo in literature, however I prefer to use the modern Mongolian form ovoo. In general, the ovoo is mainly described as an altar, which is figured by stone or wooden cairn on the top of the mountain, mountain pass, rock, and water resources (river, lake, spring). For instance, Tatăr considers that the obo is not the dwelling place of a certain spirit but rather a common altar. Additionally, Lindskog describes that the ovoo neither contains a spirit(s) nor is the spirit(s)’ abode – it is a physical construction in the land where one can be summoned to the master of land and interact with it by means of offerings of various kinds. I appreciate their description of the ovoo as the altar, but it is only one meaning of the term ovoo.

From my interlocutors’ point of view, the term ovoo has three separate meanings, one of them is a familiar term – altar. Furthermore, they use the word to designate the sacred mountain. In the steppe, ovoo represents a whole sacred mountain. In the forest-mountain steppe region of Mongolia, however, only the summit (at which the altar exists) of the sacred mountain is called ovoo. Last but not least, the essential meaning of ovoo is a supernatural entity of nature. Although Darigangas use the term ovoo in all three mentioned purposes, they mainly regard the term ovoo as the supernatural entity of the sacred sites such as the Halzan ovoo – a supernatural entity of the Halzan Mountain, Dari ovoo – a supernatural entity of the Dari Mountain, and Ganga Nuuriin ovoo – a supernatural entity of the Ganga Lake.

Vesna A. Wallace in her paper about how the summit of the Hangai mountain range of Mongolia was transformed to a Buddhist deity and proclaimed as the land of Vajrapañi, wrote that Vajrapañi, also known as the Lord of Secrets (nuutsiin ezen ochir barigch, Skt. guhyādhipati) is the most influential among Buddhist deities that were adopted, naturalized, or politicized by the Mongols. What is more, in his recent paper about ovoo worship, David Sneath regards that similar offerings and prayers are employed, and both aim to propitiate spirit masters/owners or deities of a local territory. In the Tibetan case the local entities concerned might be gzhi bdag, yul lha or sa bdag – the equivalent deities and entities as in the Mongol practice. Those are some examples of Buddhist transformation of the Mongolian ovoo.

Now I consider that terms below, from the Tibetan texts of Mongolian ovoo worship and having Buddhist influence, do not appropriately represent the Mongolian meaning of the supernatural entity of the Earth. For example, the supernatural entities are encompassed under a variety of different terms in the academic literature relating to Mongolia, such as ‘local deities’ (Bawden1958: 25), ‘master-spirits’ (Tatăr 1976: 1), ‘the Lords of the Earth’ (Heissig 1980: 102), ‘the Earth-deity’ (de Rachewiltz 2007: 132), ‘local spirits’
(Sneath 2007: 135), and ‘the spirit masters’ (author’s 2014; 2016). Supposedly, the above translations were based on a term ovoo after the Buddhist transformation of the Mongolian worship. Moreover, some Mongolian scholars use just Tibetan term in their literature in the Mongolian language, as for instance, lus, savdag (from Tib. klu, sa bdag, Urtnasana and Duurenjargal 2007: 21), or its translation to Mongolian: gazar aşnii ezed (‘lords of lands and waters’, Byambadorj 2011: 126).

On the other hand, my Dariganga informants use word Tenger (Tengeris pl.) to designate the supernatural entities of sacred sites in their local area. For example, inhabitants of the Halzan county said: Halzan ovoonii tenger (‘Heaven/God of the Mount Halzan’), or Halzan ovoonii ezen tenger (‘Lord of the Mount Halzan’). Moreover, a decree of the President of Mongolia was written to make an offering to Tenger of the Dari Mountain, a state sacred mountain. Baumann notes that in this reliance, there is no evidence whatsoever to assume that the Mongolian tngri means anything beyond or other than heaven proper, that is, the totality of celestial systems culminating in what was described figuratively as the heavenly ‘vault’ or ‘dome’.6

I suggest to avoid using some terms such as the term lus savdag and their translation gazar aşnii ezed and further its translation to ‘masters of lands and waters’ with regard to the ovoo entities due to the fact that all of those terms do not represent the actual contemporary Mongolian meaning of tenger (modern Mongolian speaking and writing, otherwise it is also written widely as tenggeri). Mongols also use tenger to denote ‘sky’, but these terms have separate meanings. For example, note Mongolian collocation tselmeg tenger (‘clear sky’) and höh tenger (‘Blue Heaven’). The first one indicates popular meaning of the sky while the second one is related to the religious understanding.

 „The theory of Tenggerism was elaborated on the basis of the worship of Tenggeri, a fundamental concept of Shamanism, the old religion of the Mongolian and Turkic nomadic peoples. According to the tenets of Shamanism, Tenggeri is like God represented on earth. And in relation to Tenggeri, the Earth represents a subordinate feminine force called Etügen. Hence come the expressions etsege Tenggeri (‘Father Heaven’) and eke Gajar (‘Mother Earth’).”7

Moreover, de Rachewiltz concludes that the Mongol ruling elite of the period under investigation held beliefs concerning Heaven and Earth – their two principal deities – that in spite of obvious formal differences, were in substance very similar to those of the ancient Turks.8

Those ideas about Heaven are very interesting, however, in my understanding based on my research, Heaven and Earth are not two different deities what scholars summarize as

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6 Baumann 2013: 246.
7 Bira: 2004: 3.
8 de Rachewiltz 2007: 137.
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the ‘two principle deities’. It is true that modern perceptions of heaven are not necessarily
the same as those of the 13th century Mongols. However, exploring the contemporary
Mongolian ovoo worship, Heaven and Earth are inseparable, a one entity in Dariganga
sacred sites.

In fact, Heaven itself is the supernatural entity of nature. The Earth is a visible entity,
whereas Heaven an invisible (supernatural) entity in the Earth. In case of the Darigangas,
when the people of the Halzan county say “Halzan ovooon”, it indicates in general both the
nature – ‘the Halzan Mountain itself’, and the supernatural entity – ‘the God of Halzan
Mountain’. For example, the chief administrator of the county informed me that the staff
clean the Halzan ovoon every month. On the other hand, he also told me that the Halzan
ovoon always protects the people and herds in the county from any natural dangers. The
first usage is about the fact that the staff of the county removes garbage from the Mount
Halzan, whereas the second meaning indicates that the God of Mount Halzan protects
its believers. In short, God, a supernatural entity of the Halzan ovoon, is only one master
who exists as the Mount Halzan according to local people.

However, people use the term ‘Halzan ovoon’ to designate both entities, in visible
and invisible ways. Therefore, I will distinguish them separately in my paper to avoid
confusing readers. When I indicate the supernatural entity, I use the Mongolian brief
term ‘Halzan Tenger’ which can indicate similarly God/Lord of the Halzan Mountain
(Halzan ovoonii ezen tenger), or the Lord of the Kingdom of Heaven of the Mount
Halzan (Halzan ovoonii tengerin ornii ezen). One the other hand, I use the term ‘Halzan
Mountain’ to indicate a visible entity of the Halzan ovoon. For example, referring to the
previous example, I just summarize that Halzan Tenger protects the people of the Halzan
county, while the staff clean garbage from the Mount Halzan once every month. Lastly,
I also use the Halzan ovoon in some occasions when its meaning is clear, such as making
offering or worshipping the Halzan ovoon.

Punishment of Halzan Tenger

The most dramatic events of the Halzan county took place in 2012–2013 when two
subsequent governors passed away suddenly and also the governmental building burned
to the ground by lightning. My informants told that Gurneejav, as the governor of the
county, led the ceremony of the Halzan ovoon worship in 2012. After lamas had finished
their religious activity, the governor made a ritual to raise an offering to Halzan Tenger
(tahil örgöh yos). In every ovoon worship, the host of the ceremony performs the ritual
in which he or she offers hadag (ceremonial scarf), milk, dairy products, sometimes
vodka and meat on the altar of ovoon. After that, the governor also regularly makes
the opening speech of the ovoon festival, and he continues to watch the festival. In
2012 the governor passed away suddenly in the festival squire, meanwhile the ceremony
was continued. The following year, Ulziisaikhan, the new governor also unexpectedly
died when he was coming back home after the ovoon worship. However, they both
organized carefully the ceremony of the Halzan ovoo worship, therefore the ceremony was completed.

I felt uncomfortable when I saw a ruin of the two-floor government building during my fieldwork in the Halzan county after the building burnt down in 2012. In the year before, Enh-Amgalan, the vice governor, said to me that they had the new government building constructed in 2010. Unfortunately, the building burnt at night of July 10th, 2012. All facilities inside the building burnt, in particular, none of the documents of the county archives survived. It harmed the inhabitants of the county then and it affects them until today.

It is interesting to note that people of the community believe that Halzan Tenger caused all three tragic cases. For instance, Sharaa, the former veterinary surgeon of the collective, believed that Halzan Tenger punished the county.

Researcher: How do you connect the tragic events with Halzan Tenger? Were they not caused by other reasons?

Sharaa: You should consider why the governors passed away following each other during the ovoo worship. In fact, over hundred people participated in the Halzan ovoo worship, but only the governors, the hosts of the ceremony, passed away, not other people. Similarly, a new governmental building burnt by lighting from among many buildings in the administrative centre. It means that Halzan Tenger punished the head of the county and the main building as a warning for the whole county.

Researcher: What is your opinion, why does Halzan Tenger punish you?

Sharaa: The reason is in us, we did not worship Halzan Tenger properly; therefore, Tenger got angry. Furthermore, I heard many times that the elderly said that the Mount Halzan had a ferocious Tenger. As a result, the ferocious Tenger’s punishment is harder than other Tengers’.

In fact, people had different attitudes to the death of the first governor, a majority of them expected that it was caused by improper holding of the Halzan ovoo worship; as a consequence Halzan Tenger punished the head of the ceremony. Additionally, the investing lama whose role was to establish the cause of the person’s death (Mong. *altan sav neeh*, lit. ‘to open the golden vessel’) determined the reason of governor’s death as caused by an angry local Tenger.

The month after the governor’s death the administrative building burnt. G. Anhbayar, the head of the Emergency Agency of Sühbaatar province, informed that the strong lighting happened in the government building and it burnt entirely in short time (“Ödriin shuudan sonin”, 22.07.2012). Local people also regarded fire caused by the lighting as a tool of Halzan Tenger and others. According to Urgunge’s memory, if lightning strikes, Daur think that *tengger* is punishing someone.10 In my fieldwork Darigangas often called for protection from Dari ovoo as well as other ovoos such as Halzan ovoo during the thunderstorm and they were terrified by the light.

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9 See more Krueger 1965.
10 Humphrey with Urgunge 1996: 114.
When I visited the Halzan county in autumn 2012, some people criticized Enh-Amgalan, who was at that time the acting governor, that he was not able to do something proper for appeasing Halzan Tenger after the governor’s death and therefore Tenger again punished them by destroying the government building. Moreover, some people also claimed that the punishments are related to leading party of the county, the late governor and his party (the unit of MPP), which could not develop well the county, and so the Tenger of the county ovoo was judging them.

The Buddhist monks were called to help: one lama of the Hatavch temple of the Halzan county and over ten lamas from the Erdenemandal, a central Monastery of the Sühbaatar province, performed religious activity to calm Halzan Tenger. Many people participated in the ceremony without ovoo festival to Halzan Tenger. Although the Halzan community propitiated Halzan Tenger in 2012, the new governor, elected in October 2012, died during the Halzan ovoo worship in the following year. After the second death of the governor people consider that they should do more appropriate actions to appease Halzan Tenger.

Calming the ferocious Tenger

In order to appease or tame the ferocious Tenger people of the Halzan county created in 2014 a large stone statue of the Buddhist deity. A Tibetan lama, by locals’ information, advised them to create in their territory Tsagaan shühert deity, (Skt. Sitātapatrā, ‘Goddess of the White Parasol’), a protector deity against supernatural dangers. The Üüden chuluu Company of the Sühbaatar province made the figure of the deity by 40 million tögrögs which were donated by the community of the Halzan county. Then Tseemaa, the governor of the Halzan county, and Tsambanurdev, an abbot lama of the Erdenemandal Monastery invited three lamas from Tibet. Mahagal, a former teacher of history at the secondary school, informed that the Tibetan lamas, who arrived to purify the figure, advised them to put the statue near the administrative centre on the opposite side of the Halzan ovoo. As a result, the deity is located on the terrace of the eastern side of the centre from where people can look at the Halzan Mountain.

In the following year lama Tsambanurdev suggested building two stupas on the Halzan Mountain; accordingly, some local people created one stupa in front of the Mount Halzan, and another large stupa on the top of the mountain.

On the other hand, local leaders also invited a shaman from Dornod province, to make a performance to appease Halzan Tenger. At that time, a participant of the ceremony told me that the shaman instructed a half day performance and many people of the Halzan county were engaged there. They prayed many times to Halzan ovoo guided by the shaman. The shaman advised them to cover a standing stone at the forehead of Mount Halzan to appease the Tenger. Later on the association of shamans of the Sühbaatar province, including three shamans of the Halzan county (Sühbaatar aimgiin böögiin holboo NGO), organized the ceremony to propitiate Halzan Tenger and they also build the shaman ovoo on the eastern slope of the Mount Halzan in 2014.
Ultimately, during my last fieldwork in 2017, inhabitants of the county firmly stated that nothing strange happened in the Halzan county in the recent years. Indeed, some people related it to the Buddhist appeasing of Halzan Tenger, whereas others claimed that the shamanist performance calmed the deity. It is hard to determine the whole tragic story, but taking it as an example I would say that Darigangas believe that the Halzan ovoo is like a person who may get angry and may calm down. In any case, it is like animist perception in Harvey’s writing about “persons, not all of whom are human”.11

**Homeland Tenger**

One low-level leader told me that the people of the Halzan county are much smarter than from other counties of the Sühbaatar province or even further away. He gave some examples of the number of people with scholarly degrees in comparison with other counties. A total population of Halzan is three times smaller than the inhabitants of Bayandelger county. However, scholars who hold Sc.D. degree of the Halzan county are larger than the total number of scholars of Bayandelger. He also mentioned leading politicians from the Halzan county such as the current prime minister of Mongolia. Ultimately, he concluded that the reason for the Halzan people to be smarter was related to the Halzan homeland and its Halzan Tenger.

Interestingly, there is one expression popular among the Halzan people: *Shuvuu tengertei shüteentei bolohoor, manai Halzangiinhanii hün ni hurts uhaantai, hüleg ni hurdan shandastai*. The expression means: “People of the Halzan county have sharp intelligence, horses of the Halzan county are faster because the *tenger* of their main sacred mountain is a bird.” Indeed, Halzan Tenger is a bird, but it is uncertain which type of bird. When I asked my informants about it, nobody replied undoubtedly. They could only reply that Halzan Tenger is a bird, or “our sacred mountain has a bird as Tenger (*shuvuu tengertei*)”.

In fact, Dariganga horses are regarded as the best breed in contemporary Mongolia. Furthermore, horses of the Halzan county are the fastest horses among the Dariganga counties. In reality, many people of the Halzan county have some successes, in particular in academic higher career, while compared with other counties.

Regardless of other reasons my informants assumed local influences over the inhabitants as having effect on their mentality and body. Tenger of the Halzan Mountain, the main sacred mountain of the Halzan county, is considered as Tenger of the whole Halzan county. Homeland Tenger (*nutgiin tenger*, ‘Tenger of the Homeland’) always supports the local people wherever and whenever. The perception of the homeland Tenger is akin to a familiar expression “By the power of the Eternal Heaven” of Mongols in the 13th century.

Beyond the Halzan ovoo, inhabitants of the Halzan county honour the Dari ovoo, the main sacred site of the Dariganga ethnic group and one of the ten national-level sacred
mountains of Mongolia (see more in author’s 2016). The Halzan ovoo is the representative of the Dari ovoo in the local community. Power of Halzan Tenger is restricted to the Halzan community. On the other hand, the Halzan ovoo is assessed as the leader of other ovoos in the Halzan community. The central sacred mountain plays a substantial role for its believers in the Halzan county. In the case of my studies of the Halzan ovoo, the ovoo worship significantly influences building of the identity of the local community.

The brief conclusion

The present paper focused on the Halzan ovoo worship, the county ovoo of the Dariganga area, as an example of the local Mongolian ovoos. Dariganga Mongols indicate the word ovoo in at least three separate meanings. In a broad sense, the ovoo represents a supernatural entity of the Earth, while in a narrow sense it indicates a sacred mountain. In the most restricted sense the ovoo refers to a physical structure such as stupa, wooden and stone cairns as an altar. Secondly, I recommend using the term ‘tenger’ to supernatural entities of the Earth. According to the Dariganga Mongols, a variety of tengers settle down in the sacred sites such as mountains, lakes, and rocks. Furthermore, the tengers are related to each other which builds a whole complex network of them.

Thirdly, the field materials show us that Mongols still have some animist landscape perception. According to my informants, Nature is alive, so that people try to establish correct contact with tengers of the sacred sites. Otherwise, the tengers can punish them. In the case of the Darigangas they consider that apart from them a number of other beings also inhabit Earth invisibly.

The ovoo worship as a primitive religious rite was influenced by shamanism and Buddhism. Even today some higher level religious organizations like the Central Monastery and an association of the shamans of the Sühbaatar province play influential role in the cult of the Mount Halzan. In some cases they also influenced the local leaders to make decisions. On the other hand, the new rules such as no permission for women to climb to the top of the sacred mountain cause some troubles for the local believers.

The state has been playing an essential role in the ovoo worship after the collapse of socialism. It is the case of the Halzan ovoo worship which was regarded as one of the official duties of the county governor. Moreover, the cult of ten sacred mountains on the national-level which are officially worshipped and propitiated by the President of Mongolia should be mentioned. Under the power of the state the ovoo worship seems to be more a native religion than anything else.

Last but not least, I consider that the local ovoo plays significant role in building regional identity as a concept of homeland. As a consequence, the ovoo worship became inseparable from the homeland cult. It might be the answer to a question why Mongols at present still actively worship ovoo.
Fig. 1. Cover of the book (2015) published for the 90th Anniversary of the Halzan county (Behind the scene there is the Halzan ovoo)

Fig. 2. The first page of the Governor’s Decree to organize the Halzan ovoo worship in 2016 (photo by the author 2017)
Fig. 3. Tsagaan shühert deity (photo by the author 2017)

Fig. 4. The top of the Halzan ovo (photo by the author 2017)
Fig. 5. The ceremony of the Halzan ovoo worship (photo by the author 2017)
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