

A CONCERN FOR THE INVISIBLE: DWELLING WITH SENSITIVE HORSES AND VANISHING GRAVES IN MONGOLIA

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ABSTRACT

Dwelling well, for the Dörvöd herders with whom I have interacted over the years, involves getting a few things right about the invisible. On the one hand, they need to navigate spaces that are teeming with ‘things’ that not everybody can see plainly, and which are best left undisturbed. On the other hand, behaving properly towards spiritual ‘land masters’ that constitute the places through which herders circulate involves them conforming to a certain regime of marking, i.e. a geography that implicitly values discretion and disappearance. Considering two apparatuses with which the invisible is either taken care of or produced – saddled horses and gravesites –, this paper explores a concern, and a talent, that people in Mongolia exhibit for things that exist by virtue of (dis)appearing.

KEYWORDS: Mongolia • Dörvöd • ghosts • spirits • horses • graves • dwelling

In the various ways through which they came to deal with ghosts and spirits (*suns chötgör*), as well as in their particular manner of crafting gravesites that correspond with a certain ethics of dwelling in places, Mongolian people seem to exhibit a talent for the invisible, a talent that is also a concern.

As herders and city dwellers, Mongolian people I was able to stay with in the far western province of Uvs from the beginning of the 2000s are often confronted with the apparition of things that cannot be seen by anybody in the same manner. They called ‘invisible things’ (*üzegdehgüi yum*) those entities whose sudden encounter is defined by a certain “regime of communication” (Delaplace 2014). While ordinary people (usually those who tell the story) can only catch glimpses of their presence, some exceptional people – seers, i.e. “people who see with their eyes” (*nüdeer yum üzdeg hün*) – may see them fully, and diviners, as ‘skilful people’ (*mergen hün*) or ‘people who know and can’ (*meddeg chaddag hün*) may act on them. Meanwhile, seers cannot act on what they see, and diviners cannot see what they act on;¹ a powerful illustration of how communication possibilities with the invisible become scattered in regions of Mongolia where shamans, who may see *and* act on such entities, have been absented from the picture.

However, it is most often as hunters that Mongolian people need to confront the invisible. Not only because hunting presupposes an ability to detect signs that remain unseen to the untrained eye, and an embodied capacity for the abduction of agency – being able to infer the existence of distant or hidden animals from the discreet indexical clues they unwittingly produce (Morizot 2021) –, but also because hunters, in Mongolia and elsewhere (cf. Déléage 2009), often experience apparitions, things that prove different from what they seemed, and entities that cannot immediately be recognised for what they are. When questioned about his hunting experiences back in 2004, old Togtuur from the Harhira-Türgen valleys inUvs province recalled this anecdote, which he did not, and still does not, know what to think of (FM 2004). While he was hunting at the edge of town a marmot he had spotted suddenly started splitting into many different animals, and then bleated. Togtuur is no green grass, he is a seasoned hunter whose father also hunted and while he did not know what he saw, he knew that was *something*.

Morten A. Pedersen (2007: 322), during his fieldwork with Darhad people in northern Mongolia, recorded this story from a retired truck driver:

Once, this happened to me. One cold winter night Dashnyam and I were hunting at Bosgot Ulaan Maraa. We were resting when a male deer appeared to drink from the salty bog. As the deer turned around in the moonlight, I realised that it was all half (*bugyn örөөсөн tal*). It only had one antler and just half the legs (*tal höltei*). Terrified, I woke Dashnyam up, and asked, ‘what is this strange thing?’ ‘It is something from the South’, he said, ‘We must go from here immediately’. So, we left without killing it. After we had galloped for a long time, Dashnyam stopped and asked me what I saw. ‘I saw a half deer’, I said. I felt a cold chill as he replied, ‘Oh, I saw an old one-legged woman with a stick!’ A few weeks later, Dashnyam died.

In this instance, the perceptual discrepancy between the two acolytes, yet most of all the tragic demise of the narrator’s friend, suffice to conclude with confidence that what they saw was a *badagshin*, a half-person, that Darhad and other Siberian populations (see Lambert 2002: 365–396) have learned to recognise in the deserted steppe or tundra. Yet, as in Togtuur’s experience, the apparition does not immediately present itself for what it is; its sudden and unexpected perception does not hold the key (as things in our inhabited world usually do) to its qualification. Naming these entities for what they are (a specific kind of spirit, a ghost, or even the ghost of so and so) requires some *work* and a relational-discursive apparatus that confirms them as the ‘apparition’ they were shaping up to be (cf. Delaplace 2021; 2022).

By apparition, of course, I do not only mean visual manifestations, as the invisible may come to people’s attention through any other sensory channel: they are things that are heard, smelt, touched – more seldom tasted² – or indeed seen, while they are deemed not seeable, tasteable, touchable, smellable or hearable “in normal conditions” (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470). One purpose of this paper, therefore, is to describe some of the apparatuses that are used, in Mongolia, to recognise apparitions for what they are. What I am aiming for, in so doing, is to lay the groundwork for an anthropology of apparitions that is indeed a comparative pragmatics of the invisible: a reasoned collection of relational and discursive devices employed in Mongolia and elsewhere to tackle the invisible as an ever-present – I mean, ever-appearing – component of the world.

More precisely, however, I will show that dwelling in one's '(home)land' ([*törsön nutag*]), for the Dörvöd Mongol people I have met and lived with in Uvs province, involves a certain attention and a certain worry for one's relationship with 'invisible things'. On the one hand, herders I stayed with in Tarialan and Ömnögovi districts in the first half of the 2000s were careful to conform to a particular, yet often implicit, ethics of dealing with invisible beings such as 'land masters' (*gazryn ezed*), which itself involved a particular craft, a talent in producing devices of invisibility, most of all graves that may come to disappear. On the other hand, people I stayed with in the regional centre of Ulaangom, more recently – often the very same people I had stayed with in Harhiraa – were also careful to negotiate successfully a whole array of invisible things such as 'pollution' (*buzar*), 'luck' (*az*), 'curses' (*haraal*) and many other components of the cosmos that had to be rightly composed (Delaplace 2019b).

If there indeed is a pragmatics of the invisible in Mongolia, it is far from being monolithic. It has taken and continues to take many forms across time and in various places, depending on the possibilities created by a particular political situation (the presence of aristocrats, for example, who may establish a different relationship than mere commoners with spiritual land masters, see Damdinsüren 1997) or religious configuration (for example the availability of shamans to act as powerful, Swiss-knife like mediators with the invisible, see Delaplace 2008: 281–282), not to mention socio-economic factors (for example, a moment of 'transition' that liberates all sorts of invisible beings, as Lars Højer and Axel Pedersen [2019] have shown). What is common to all these apparatuses and situations is nothing more than a certain *concern*, the worry that *dwelling well* involves getting something right about the invisible components of a given place, and a certain *talent*: a cunning craft in designing elegant and efficient devices to tackle this problem.

In proposing this, however, I am not making much of a culturalist claim, as humans have always had to accept the idea that inhabiting a place, anytime, anywhere, involves at some point or another learning to live with that which appears – i.e., learning to live with the invisible, whichever name this is given locally. There are things in our world that exist by virtue of appearing as invisible; some collectives choose to equip themselves with a greater or lesser number of social and cosmological technologies to tackle or even harness them. Invisible things, on the other hand, keep confronting humans with the necessity to come up with practical ways to accommodate their ambiguous existence in their everyday lives (Delaplace 2022). Social and cultural anthropologists who may be tempted to argue that their own world is devoid of things that exist by virtue of appearing should look again at the foundational moments of their own discipline, when culture was something that needed to become apparent in order to be studied (Delaplace 2019a). But really, Bruno Latour (e.g. 2013) and Actor Network Theory have now made this case convincingly enough, within the realm of social sciences, so it probably does not need to be stressed further at this stage. Therefore, by saying Mongolians share a concern for the invisible, I am not making much of an ethnographic claim at all: while people throughout Mongolia indeed share between themselves a concern for the invisible, they also share it with everybody else. No one can really afford to be completely unconcerned with the invisible. What remains to be attended to, pragmatically (cf. Berthomé et al. 2012), are the varying ways in which the invisible is dwelt with, and the kind of attention this involves on the part of collectives as they adopt new livelihoods or oscillate between modalities of inhabiting places.

Another reason I am putting this emphasis on pragmatics, on changing technologies and apparatuses, is that I would like to side-step official institutions in this paper. It would be difficult to miss the fact that there have been, and still are, several organisations in Mongolia the main purpose of which is indeed to administer the population's relationship with the invisible. Thus, several schools of Mahâyâna Buddhism have been in competition throughout Mongolian history, and still are today, for the execution of life cycle and affliction rituals (*sensu* Turner 1967). Meanwhile, a diversity of specialists now called 'shamans' (*böö, udgan*), who maintained varied relations to lineage elders associated with the Buddhist clergy (Humphrey 1995; Humphrey and Onon 1996), have offered their services across the Mongolian plateau. They are now often found in cities and might congregate with patients and followers in 'associations' that emphasise the link between 'shamanism' and 'Mongolian traditions' (Merli 2010). Today as at certain periods in the past, finally, Christian churches have made inroads into Mongol groups, although none has so far managed to gain the kind of prominence Christianity had acquired earlier in Mongolian history (Halbertsma 2008) or has enjoyed in other parts of Asia (such as South Korea for example).

In this paper, I will resist the inclination to take an institutional standpoint on the invisible. Rather than focusing on the relational apparatuses provided by shamans or by the Buddhist clergy, I will look at how laypeople deal with apparitions and the invisible with or without these institutionalised mediations. What I describe here are just a handful of daily practices that are not necessarily supervised by a church or performed by an established specialist. By looking at horses and graves, and stressing the unexpected connection between these two, I hope to work toward opening up the scope of possible mediations with the invisible, to include more discreet and lower profile possibilities of being concerned with the proper way of dwelling in the world.

OF HORSES AND OTHER WAYS OF DEALING WITH INVISIBLE PRESENCES

Let us start with one of the most basic, perhaps one of the most iconic apparatus employed in Mongolia to detect and manage the presence of an 'invisible thing': that which is brought about by the assemblage between a horse rider – man or woman – and his or her mount. It is a well-known story now that horses, in Mongolia, are trusted to feel the invisible (Delaplace 2010; Solovyeva 2022). What I always found fascinating with horses and the invisible, is that they are not just known to warn people about the presence of wandering souls and spirits, the intensity of their reaction is also indicative of the proximity of these entities. Moreover, they are expected to react equally to the presence of *any* 'invisible thing' (a soul, a demon, a land master, a divinity, etc.). The behaviour of horses, therefore, is indicative of two crucial elements in Mongolian people's ideas about the invisible: first it signals the unity of a certain range of beings (in a way, 'invisible things' in Mongolian could be defined as those things whose presence horses but not humans feel), second it measures their presence and proximity.

P. P. Batarov (1926 quoted by Harva 1938: 268–269), working with the Buryats of Alarsky district, has reported a curious ritual procedure to ensure the return of a per-

son's soul in their body, a ritual rather well-known throughout Mongol populations, usually referred to as 'calling [back] the soul' (Bawden 1994b [1962]; Sarközy 1996).³ A few items were gathered next to the patient, among which an arrow,⁴ from the tip of which a red string was stretched out through the door and tied to the branches of a birch outside. A saddled horse was positioned next to the tree, and the person tasked with holding the horse watched for it to start trembling, for this was interpreted as the sign that the soul had travelled along the string, passed next to the horse, and reintegrated the body of the patient, hence confirming the success of the ritual.

During my own fieldwork with Dörvöd herders in Uvs province, far western Mongolia, I collected a few stories that strikingly echo Batarov's account. One narrative is especially captivating. It was told to me in 2004 by Tselei, a middle-aged woman locally known for her personal interest in things invisible, and for her chance encounters with ghosts on a few occasions (FM 2004).

In autumn, as families had moved downstream, my father Chimed saddled a horse and went out to hunt marmots on the summer pastures, in Shar Hulhaid, where our winter camp also was. There is a hunting shelter under a white rock over there. It can accommodate a single person at night. My father decides to sleep there, so he steps down from his horse and fetters it nearby. [...] He lights a fire outside his shelter to cook dinner, he eats it and the sun sets. Once night had fallen, as he was about to sleep, he heard the sound of two men chatting thus: "dungur dungur", in a language he didn't know. He could only hear the "dungur dungur" of their chatter and the "tovur tovor" of their horses' hooves coming his way. It was pitch dark; he could see nothing. So, my father rejoiced: "Oh, here are two men like me who are hunting game, they'll join me", and he stoked his fire. The fire was burning high, it was giving out a lot of light, and suddenly his horse started neighing! [...] So, he feels scared, he gets into his shelter and lies down with his rifle. He said the men had never come and that they were ghosts [*güits*]. His horse neighed and kicked against the rock next to my father all night long. And my father, he spent a very uncomfortable night.

Perhaps Chimed should have known better than to stoke his fire upon overhearing people from afar, chatting in a language he did not recognise. The story dates back to the 1980s, when even the remote Harhiraa-Türgen valleys were a rather cosmopolitan place, where Russians and other members of the Soviet bloc could perhaps be met by chance while spending the night in a hunting camp. But for such a seasoned hunter as Chimed, this kind of encounter should call for caution, and a feeling of loneliness, a desire for sociality, is probably to blame for his careless enthusiasm. He has his horse to thank for preventing him from a more damaging exposure to a potentially harmful encounter with a roaming 'ghost' and for taking the timely decision to retreat into his shelter. The horse not only warned him of the true nature of the presence, by neighing at the incoming noises, it also protected him from their invasion of his shelter by shielding Chimed with its sensitive body. The horse went from neighing (more and more furiously, one is led to imagine) to kicking the rock all night long, giving the strong impression of approaching spirits, stopped only at the doorstep of the hunter's refuge by the excitable flesh of his steed.

It is interesting to note that horses not only act as detectors of the presence of invisible things roaming around in the Mongolian steppes or channelled through the conduit of red strings to their rightful owners. As in Chimed's story, the horse's body can be employed as a buffer or receptacle for these entities. An interesting variant to the ritual described by Batarov among the Alarsky Buryats was recounted in the first decades of the 20th century, both by Antoine Mostaert (1968: 598) among the Ordos Mongols of the Yellow River bend (in what is now the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia), and by Urgunge Onon among the Daur of Manchuria (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 195). These two rituals are not meant to call back the soul of a sick person, but to ensure proper departure from the body of a dying one.

In the Daur version of the ritual, a string connects the head of the person to their favourite horse, which is saddled for the occasion. The horse is supposed to act as the soul's mount, and right after its owner dies, it is slaughtered and eaten, except for the heart, liver, lungs, and spleen which are displayed next to the dead person's coffin. In the Ordos version of the ritual, it is the hand of the owner that is tied to the horse with string, and instead of being slaughtered, the animal is gifted to the Buddhist monk overseeing the procedure. In these two instances, no mention is made of the bodily reactions of the horse being watched (although this could just have been overlooked by the witnesses), yet the animal acts as a psychopomp, a vessel for the soul to be led away from its material envelope. There is something similar in Chimed's story: throughout the night his horse seemingly absorbs the incoming 'ghosts', so that Chimed remains safe in his haven. Horses' bodies have a way of physically accommodating invisible presences that human ones clearly do not.

Meanwhile, in all three rituals described by Batarov, Mostaert and Onon, souls are expected to travel along strings or "tiny ropes" (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 195), like currents of an almost electric nature. The idea that spirits can travel along strings and thus be directed or trapped in this manner is rather widespread throughout North Asia: several Turkic populations in Siberia use what ethnographers have come to know as 'spirit paths' to channel them towards specific places (e.g. Delaby 1998). There is no mention of such strings in Chimed's story of course, but the ghosts he narrowly dodges are still called *güits* by Tselei, a Dörvöd variant of a rather widely used term for ghosts, *güidel*, literally 'currents'.⁵ Ghosts that are called *güidel* are not exactly revenants. They are sometimes said to originate from the souls of wrongly buried corpses, or from people who died by suicide or accident, but this identification is very rarely explicit in stories of their encounter. In this respect, *güidel* are very different from *süns*, souls, manifestations of dead people who can be named and subsequently cared for (mainly through renewed rituals of 'merit-making' or *buyan*), so as to prevent further haunting episodes. Ghosts that are called *güidel* are seldom investigated, they remain anonymous 'currents' that happen to cross or saturate a given location at a given time (Delaplace 2008: 261–263).

Phenomenologically speaking, *güidel* are not vastly different from 'land masters', although they are supposed to be different entities of course: land masters are not ghosts but tutelary spirits who are thought to dwell in specific places (mountain tops for the former, rivers and sources for latter). Ensuring proper living conditions, for herders-hunters, involves worshipping them appropriately, mainly through offerings made at cairns in the summer (on mountain-top cairns) and on the first morning of the lunar

year (at the cairn closest to one's current home).⁶ Like *güidel*, land masters behave like currents and circulate through places.⁷ This is one of the reasons why cairns are so useful: acting as some sort of terminal, they offer a platform from which otherwise pervasive or unlocatable land masters can be reached. Any salient feature of the environment, in a way, may be used as a site to worship the various kinds of invisible things roaming around in one's inhabited land. Thus, single trees or protruding rocks are often seen as more closely linked to invisible entities (often only vaguely identified) and worshipped with respectful ceremonial silk scarves. Cairns, in this light, are nothing more than artificial saliences, strategically positioned in one's (home)land to serve as communication terminals with otherwise fluid and ever-circulating currents of invisible things. Ghosts, on the other hand, are not presented with the same offerings as land masters,⁸ and there are no devices equivalent to cairns available to reach them.

One can therefore measure the value of horses as detectors of these unpredictable currents, for a traveller to know whenever they happen to lay on his or her path, and also for the traveller to be protected from any contact with these currents should he or she happen to stumble upon them. The most common story told about horses and ghosts (see Solovyeva 2020) is that horses might stop inexplicably somewhere, refusing to make any further move – as if they were frozen or fettered – until their rider has taken particular action (I will come back to this point). No clear explanation was provided by my interlocutors in this regard, except that the place was obviously “haunted”, that is, “with current”. It would seem in light of what has been said above, however, that the horse had in this case absorbed a full charge of the current (not a progressive one, as in Chimed's story), which shut it down as a detecting device, while the rider was spared from the nefarious effect of a direct encounter with these invisible things. It is commonly said that coming in direct contact with a ghost – that is, without the kind of protection a horse can provide – has the effect of a violent shock on the witness, a ‘fright’ or ‘jump’ (*tsochirol*) resulting in a catatonic state that could prove fatal if no ritual specialist is called to ‘call back’ the soul, which most certainly escaped in the process. The stories of horses suddenly and forcefully stopping in the middle of nowhere therefore evoke some sort of substitution. It is the mount which has become catatonic, rather than the rider, who may become ‘afraid’ (*ai-*) in the process yet remains safe from the fright that would have been caused if the encountered invisible entity had not been absorbed by the horse's sensitive flesh.

The problem with these fluid, current-shaped invisible things is that no one can really locate them permanently and decisively. As noted before by other ethnographers (cf. Pedersen 2017) the cosmos is dwelt in as a constant flux of various entities whose nature, trajectory, and exact whereabouts are impossible to anticipate. Of course, there are some places where spirits are known to reside or be more readily reachable, but the environment of a (home)land – even for someone like Chimed who has carefully trodden through it all his life – is teeming with presences that are impossible to pin down. Pinning down these presences and entities, on the other hand, is precisely what the various Buddhist institutions have tried to do when they disseminated throughout Mongol populated lands at various points in history. The Gelugpa clergy most of all, which has had a long and far-reaching influence among Mongolian populations, has endeavoured to overpower and pacify demons with a network of monasteries and through the powers of their residing reincarnations (Charleux 2006; Humphrey and Hülrebaatar 2013).

As in Tibet, however, where the foundational figure of Padmasambhava intended to nail down the demoness that symbolised the unconverted state of the territory, success was only partial.

While horses will not help their rider discriminate between different kinds of invisible things, they will at least prevent him or her from getting shocked by an unanticipated encounter. It is worth noting, meanwhile, that it is not just any horse that is trusted to be sentient of things invisible, but only saddled horses – mounts. There is indeed a clear distinction in Mongolian language between horses as livestock, grazing in herds on the plains, and horses as mounts, singled out from the herd in order to be saddled: the former are called *aduu* and the latter *mor'*. Confusing one for the other, as the author still does on some occasions, calling herds of horses *mor'*, is never acceptable – it does not make sense –, and always elicits a correction from Mongolian interlocutors.

Now, in all the examples provided above, it is really *mor'* that are endowed with the ability to sense (and absorb) the invisible, not *aduu*. Clearly, it is not only a matter of anyone being with the horse to witness their reaction (and people being able to observe the reaction of a *mor'* more often than that of an *aduu*): unmounted horses are purposely saddled in the rituals described by Batarov, Mostaert and Onon, when they are expected to sense the passage of a soul. What is sentient of the invisible, therefore, is not only the horse, but the assemblage between a horse and its rider – or the horse potentialised, capacitated as it were, through its bodily association with a human. This shows marked interspecific talent on the part of Mongolian herder-hunters (cf. Marchina 2019; Hutchins 2019), an ability to harness possibilities emerging from the association of two beings, which are effectively absent from either one of them independently. It is not only humans who are unable to perceive the invisible without their horses, but also horses who remain insensitive until they become associated, through the saddle and bridle, with a human counterpart.

OF HORSES AND GRAVESITES

There are several ways in which horses have featured in funerals throughout Mongol history, and most of these were as the victims of sacrifice. Thus, Giovanni di Plano Carpini (1996 [1252]: 47–48) famously reports that a Mongol man of noble rank is usually buried with a mare, its foal, and a saddled horse, while another horse is slaughtered and eaten next to his burial site, before attendants “fill the skin with straw and mount it on two or four poles up high”. Garma D. Sanzheyev and other Russophone ethnographers quoted by Roberte N. Hamayon (1990: 638–640) report that at the turn of the 20th century, on comparable occasions, Cisbaikalian Ekhirit-Bulagat Buryats would hang the complete skin of the horse on a pole, looking upwards, together with the respiratory system of the animal.⁹ Medieval chroniclers have also reported how horses were sent galloping over the fresh grave of an emperor in order to level the ground and make sure no trace of the grave would remain.

Another more discreet, less known, and more contemporary way in which horses, as *mor'*, are made to contribute to Mongolian funerals, however, is to detect the presence of invisible things at the gravesite. More specifically, saddled horses contribute to the process of ‘requesting’ and ‘seizing a place’ (*gazar guih*, *gazar avah*), most of all when laying

a body out in the open as was the custom for commoners in Mongolia before the funerary reform of 1955 (Delaplace 2008). This process has been well described by Charles R. Bawden (1994a [1977]), on the basis of three different texts: one manuscript detailing “prayers” to be read and protocols to be performed when “requesting land” for a gravesite, the transcript of an interview of two elders by a colleague of the author’s, and an excerpt from the autobiography of Jügderiin Damdin, published in 1973, where he described his grandmother’s funeral in the first decades of the 20th century.

As the first manuscript makes clear, following the proper protocol to establish a selected plot of land as a gravesite where a dead person may be laid out in the open ensures that various invisible things in charge of it will be ‘pleased’, i.e. that they will not cause harm to any human involved, or to their progeny. Thus, ritual cakes (*balin*) offered at the site need to be of the “nine sorts of grain” for “royal water spirits” (*lus haan*) to be satisfied; the milk sprinkled needs to be of a white camel with a foal, a white mare with a foal, a white cow with a calf, or a white goat with a kid for the “water spirits” (*lus*) and “tutelary spirits” (*sahiulsan burhan*) to be content (Bawden 1994a [1977]: 257–258). More generally, in order to avoid any kind of future sickness for him or the dead person’s relative, the ‘ground-seer’ – the one in charge of this protocol, according to Bawden’s source – must draw a circle on the ground with an arrow, to which a host of small artefacts are attached. He thus marks out the designated place, and then lays out a white skin to cover it. The transcript of the interview provides a version with a few significant variations: this time the line is drawn with an antelope horn, a tortoise shell is dragged around within these established limits, and the offerings are mainly made of rice.

The third document, the autobiography, confirms the use of an antelope horn to circle around the place that is ‘taken’, and mentions the spreading out of an antelope skin over the designated surface, as well as offerings of milk and barley. However, this account also adds a crucial detail to the rendition of this protocol: it specifies that before it can be requested and taken, the place needs to be *chosen*. Damdin therefore describes how the man in charge of this operation, Tseveen Achit, reaches an area that seems appropriate to lay dead bodies on the ground,¹⁰ and looks in all directions, muttering prayers, visibly unsure of which precise location to pick. As soon as the author’s horse starts urinating, however, his hesitations vanish: “‘Right, that’s it, that is very good’ he said” (Bawden 1994a [1977]: 260) and he starts tracing the circle around the exact spot the horse has urinated on.

My own conversations with Dörvöd herder-hunters, diviners, and monks in Uvs province confirmed that the protocol followed to choose, request, and take a place for funerary purposes is roughly similar today, despite the upheavals caused in Mongolian funerary practices by the 1950s reform, officially forbidding the practice of laying out the dead in the open. To begin with, and as I have shown elsewhere, the practice of laying out in the open was never completely abandoned throughout the socialist period, and has even regained prominence in Mongolia since the abrogation of funerary laws at the beginning of the 1990s (Delaplace 2008; Delaplace and Legrain 2021). As a result, herder-hunters in Tarialan or Ömnögovi districts still perform these protocols out in the mountains, whenever they are instructed by a lama or diviner to lay out a dead parent there. However, most herder-hunters in Uvs province have *also* welcomed burial as a possible funerary option. I have recorded several cases of residents of Tarialan Sum,

who led a nomadic lifestyle until their death and who are buried in the provincial centre's cemetery, in a similar fashion as they would have been in Ulaanbaatar.¹¹ As far as I know, the protocol to pick and request a place also applies in such cemeteries, and the fact they are administratively managed does not mean families may dispense themselves with any astrological preoccupation.

As already described in a recent paper (Delaplace and Legrain 2021; see also Delaplace 2006), choosing and seizing a funerary location inUvs province today involves two different specialists who exhibit two contrasting approaches to astrology and divination. First, a specially designated monk, preferably attached to an established temple, opens the golden vessel (*altan sav nee-*, or *shinjee nee-* opens an investigation, as Dörvöd people tend to call it) in order to instruct the family on the way their deceased relative should be cared for and on all the details of the ceremony. Second, a local diviner – who may just be an elder (as seems to be the case for Damdin's grandmother) – goes out with a few male relatives of the deceased to pick and request a gravesite. This is usually done the day before the funeral, although the elders interviewed for Bawden (1994a [1977]) stated this was done just before laying the body down, on the very same day. Picking the place involves a different kind of knowledge than that with which the first monk is trusted. On the basis of general indications provided by the 'golden vessel', which always include a direction in which the body must be taken, he must apply his topological knowledge of the local funerary geography.

There are some general dos and don'ts in this respect, which are more or less obvious to the broader population: thus, a gravesite is chosen ideally on the south face of a mountain, in the middle of the slope, far away from rivers and water sources, from cairns and other salient feature of the landscape (see Delaplace 2006; see also Humphrey 2002: 77–78). There are also rules about the trajectory the funerary convoy may or may not make (for example rivers should not be crossed), which influence the choice of a proper site, and there are finally rules as to the possibility of choosing the same place twice for two different people (Delaplace 2006). Moreover, there are some designated areas, as hinted by Damdin in his account (Bawden 1994a [1977]), where dead people are preferentially placed. This is what Dörvöd people call a *salantai gazar* (from the Tibetan *sa-langs*, 'to take the place' and Mongolian *gazar* 'place'). The study of funerary topography in Harhira-Türgen valleys indeed revealed that a few places in the mountains were more suitable than others to lay people on the ground as "they had been taken long ago by a powerful lama", according to my interlocutors (Delaplace 2008: 151–154), thus making the choice of the gravesite (and the ritual that had to be performed to 'request' it again) easier.

The person in charge of choosing the place therefore needs to exhibit a particular skill – and 'skilful people' is indeed a generic term used in Mongolia to refer to these local diviners and knowledgeable elders – to navigate all these criteria and the topological specificities of his (home)land. Yet even when he has computed all these elements into an acceptable solution, what he comes up with is still a rather wide area, within which a proper gravesite – no more than a couple of square meters – remains to be singled out. This is the part where horses are indeed relied on to select safely the right location; what Damdin witnessed at the beginning of the 20th century has been told again to me on a consistent basis by my Dörvöd interlocutors, i.e. that ultimately the spot where a horse urinates is deemed suitable location to place a dead body (FM 2000–2005).

The reason for this curious ethnographic detail is never really explained, either by Bawden or by any Mongolian person with whom I have discussed it. However, it resonates with another curious element of Mongolian horse-riding etiquette, which has also been regularly mentioned to me in relation to ghosts. Whenever a horse stops and freezes unexpectedly and mysteriously while travelling at dusk, the only way for the rider to make the animal go again is to urinate between its legs. Instead of looking at these two uses as mere idiosyncratic habits (something that could just be brushed away, with just a slight change of vocabulary, as superstition), it is rather tempting to look at what these may say of Mongolian technologies of human–animal relationship. A couple of conjectures could be risked, that would help interpret these two elements as parts of a single conception and practice of horse riding. Let us propose, on the one hand, that peeing *between the legs* of the animal (a detail that was always specified to me) seeks to mimic a situation where the horse itself would be urinating. It sounds probable, on the other hand, that Mongols would take notice of the fact that for a horse to urinate, it must be calm and relaxed. While indeed horses may defecate while running away from danger, they must stand still to pee, and therefore need to choose a time and place where they feel safe to do so.

In other words, when horses urinate, they must not be *feeling* anything dangerous in the vicinity, visible or not to their human riders. If indeed they are endowed with the capacity to sense the presence of invisible things, as in Mongolia, it is the sign that no unwelcome and unidentified influence is already present at the particular location where a dead parent is going to be placed. In other words, it is a useful indication that the place is somehow vacant (*ezgüi*, lit. ‘without master’) and therefore may be requested from tutelary spirits to whom humans must refer in order to properly inhabit their (home) land. If horses are used as detectors of the invisible, then their peeing amounts to a measure of zero. Conversely, and more cunningly still, urinating between the legs of one’s horse, when it finds itself shocked by sudden contact with ‘things’ that its rider cannot see, is a clever way to induce a muscle relaxation in the animal by making it sound *as if* it was calmly urinating itself.¹² Taking on the bodily perspective of the horse or, to draw on Jakob von Uexküll’s (2010 [1934]) celebrated vocabulary, entering its animal world, the horse rider substitutes himself for his mount in the performance of a physiological function that helps it out of the situation in which it is stuck. The fact it is reportedly efficient makes this instance of human–animal pragmatics more beautiful still.

DWELLING AS A STATEMENT OF INVISIBILITY

The relational subtleties through which the assemblage between a horse rider and his or her mount is maintained throughout Mongol-populated areas illustrates the talent Mongolian people show in designing intricate apparatuses to deal with the invisible components of their world. What these technologies also show, on the other hand, is a concern for the conditions of dwelling in the land they inhabit. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to propose the seemingly dubious argument that a gravesite, in the Harhira-Türgen valley at least, was the only place where my Dörvöd Mongol interlocutors seemed to implement an otherwise unattainable ethics of dwelling, by enacting a particular regime of presence.

Dwelling, throughout contemporary Mongolia, is closely associated with the *nutag*, a term that I have consistently translated in this paper as '(home)land', yet without expanding on its meaning and without explaining the bracketing of '(home)'. Saying that dwelling in contemporary Mongolia is closely associated with the *nutag* is a bit of an understatement, almost a pleonasm. The *nutag*, in Mongolia today, is where you dwell, or rather, it is the place of reference of your dwelling in the world, wherever you happen to live at a given moment. This is probably one of the few ethnographic statements that may be made confidently about contemporary Mongolia in general and about almost anyone identifying as Mongolian today.

So, what *is* a *nutag*? There are several ways of defining it and its polysemy is indeed one of the conditions of possibility for its pervasiveness in Mongolian conceptions of dwelling. When asking someone about their *nutag* today, the most likely answer is an administrative one: the indication of a province and a district of origin, hence the bracketed (home) in the translation of the word. One's *nutag*, 'land', is always the place a person identifies as the locality they come from, their homeland, even if they do not actually live there. It will be their birthplace if they moved somewhere else afterwards, but it can also be their parents' birthplace if they have always lived in the city. There is indeed a sense in which a city, most of all the capital city Ulaanbaatar, is not eligible as a *nutag*. In a context where more and more people dwell there, and indeed have lived there for several generations, the claim of a distant and estranged *nutag* sounds more and more like fiction, and is more or less accepted as such by the youngest generation. This ideology has been aptly called *nutagism* by David Sneath (2018: 203), and it indeed informs contemporary identity politics in Mongolia (see also Marchina 2019: 77; Charlier 2020; Legrain 2020; and Namsaraeva 2020 for a perspective from Buryatia).

As *nutag* can also refer to the whole of the Mongolian territory, it is always possible to claim this as one's homeland. By virtue of a condensation effect that can be mentally supported by the administrative subdivisions of the country, every single *nutag* indexes the whole of the nation – the ultimate homeland –, while the nation is literally embodied in the most famously salient features of Mongolian landscape, which are admired and celebrated as a synecdoche of the entire territory through poetry and tourism. In the contemporary identity politics of Mongolia, one feels Mongolian either by experiencing one's relationship with the nation when collectively inhabiting one's individual locality, or by experiencing an individual relationship with the localities in reference to which the nation is collectively inhabited.

By classic segmentary logic, however, the *nutag* becomes something else when discussed and experienced at the level of a single district (*sum*) or even province (*aimag*). When people living in the neighbouring districts of Tarialan and Ömnögov' talk within Uvs province, for example, they will not just mention these districts as their *nutag*, they will usually specify which subdistrict (*bag*)¹³ they and their 'elders and youngsters' (*ah düü*) nomadise within. One's *nutag*, in this sense, designates the area within which a yearly nomadic circuit is performed, and where the four main seasonal stations are found. For the Dörvöd herder-hunters whom I have known since the beginning of the 2000s, and for their children, this *nutag* defined the way they dwelt in Mongolia, even when they happened to have decided to stay in the provincial centre Ulaangom for an extended period of time – perhaps even the rest of their lives.

Now, actually dwelling in one's *nutag*, that is, effectuating the nomadic circuit through the seasonal stations, is known to be a difficult thing. Climatic conditions would be tough (Ulaangom's climate is worse than any other district in Uvs aimag, and indeed one of the worst in the country), while climate change has decidedly depleted the grass covering and water supplies in the mountains. This means harder work than before to get one's livestock fed and watered, and to shelter it from the unforgiving winters and springs, not to mention episodes of catastrophic weather conditions (*zud*) that might decimate a whole herd in a fortnight (or wolves, which could slaughter the few surviving animals). In addition, what makes dwelling in one's *nutag* hard is the delicate temper of the invisible land masters, at least such is the case in the Harhiraa-Türgen valleys, where they are held to be especially wrathful.

Thus, stories recount how snakes appeared at the home of a woman who had just spilt milk in Harhiraa river (therefore polluting it), and one of my friends has had to perform an elaborate ritual of purification at a source next to which he had unwittingly urinated, lest a bleeding sore on his buttocks would not heal (FM 2004). On the other hand, some unfortunate individuals were remembered as having gone blind after foolishly cutting a single standing tree or toppling an ancient bronze age anthropomorphic-looking stele. That people could go blind for getting on the wrong side of the invisible always sounded to me like pitiless, yet darkly meaningful retributive justice: if you fail to take notice of the visibly invisible (salient features of the landscape that index invisible presences), then even the visible will become invisible to you. Preventing the wrath of these land masters seemed to always be at the back of my interlocutors' minds as they were going about their daily activities in their *nutag*. Some activities seemed more delicate than others and elicited more care on their part: hunting, moving one's felt tent and putting it up in another station, collecting water or collecting wood (most of all when trees had to be felled). These occasions were often accompanied with incense and sometimes milk or alcohol offerings, performed to placate the potential anger of land masters. But certain precautions were also taken to execute this task in a certain way, I would say with a certain style.

To put it bluntly, Dörvöd herder-hunters seemed careful to refrain from seeming as though they were claiming any mastery of the particular places where they lived. What seemed important to my interlocutors, in other words, was never to look as though they were challenging the mastery that *ezen savdag*, as invisible land masters, were the only entities legitimate to exert on the space of the *nutag*. Thus, they avoided any appearance of entitlement whenever they collected resources, always preferably grazing at the surface of what was available rather than helping themselves to an available stock. Hunted animals had to be only those that had been willingly given out to the hunter by land masters and most of all by their arch-supervisor, the White Old Man (*Tsagaan Övgön*), to whom all game was livestock. Of course, this was a great source of uncertainty and misfortune, as it is always very difficult to know which animal is made available and which is not supposed to be shot. One of my closest acquaintances, a 'skilful person' to make it worse, had the misfortune of shooting a wolf that was beloved of the land masters (*savdag hairtai chono*); his son's fall from a cliff, from which he narrowly survived after a period of coma, was widely attributed to this mistake.

In general, however, this preoccupation with not angering land masters involves what could be called a statement of invisibility. Dörvöd herder-hunters took great care

not to leave traces of their occupation of the places where they stayed. They collected wood sparingly, scanning trees for dead branches, tiringly cutting up old logs, or felling trees in a fashion that would not alter the configuration of the grove. Of course, they took care to clear the area of the encampment after leaving a station, but more crucially still, they inevitably pushed away one of the large stones (ideally three) on which their stove rested, which signalled the domestic quality of the place and thus its surrendering back to the jurisdiction of the land masters. The only space over which a herder's family could claim full and uncontested mastery was that of the round felt tent within which a man and a woman complemented each other as the master of the house (*geriin ezen*) and the master of the fire (*galyn ezen*) respectively. As exclusive property of the family head, the livestock was of course owned explicitly by the master of the house, but despite recurrent worries about overgrazing, their pasturing throughout the *nutag* all year long was not supposed to leave any durable mark of habitation either.

It seemed that Dörvöd herder-hunters therefore followed a delicate and demanding ethics of dwelling in their *nutag* that involved not leaving any trace of masterful occupation in any of the places they stayed throughout their annual nomadic cycle. The only traces they seemed comfortable with leaving were those of movement: paths along which they circulated through their homeland, or indeed any trash, refuse or wreck, as long as their concentration somewhere did not indicate deliberate accumulation linked to repeated residence. Dwelling well in the *nutag*, in other words, involved behaving as if herder-hunters were never occupying any particular location within it. Dwelling well, for my Dörvöd interlocutors, involved doing as if they were always living in the whole of the *nutag*, constantly circulating within it (stations being mere pauses), and thus never looking as though they claimed any specific location as theirs (FM 2000–2005).

This fiction, however, is impossible to maintain, and there are many instances in which surviving involves a measure of mastery over the surrounding area. This is true mainly in winter, where low temperatures and generally adverse climatic conditions make it imperative that herders would stay at one station for longer than the others, with a more stable and established presence. Without dwelling too much on the ruses and negotiations thanks to which herders may make it acceptable for them and the land masters to adapt the etiquette they tend to follow the rest of the year, I would like to make a brief remark here on alternative modalities of dwelling in one's *nutag*. What I have described as a default mode of behaving throughout the year for contemporary Dörvöd herder-hunters is actually just one of at least two possible ways of doing it. The other, in a nutshell, is by dwelling in a *hot*.

The term *hot*, in common parlance, means a city. And indeed, it is obvious that cities have for long, and might always have, been a modality of dwelling in one's *nutag*. When living in cities, Mongolian people follow different rules of dwelling and a different charter of relationship with land masters and other invisible things. One could oppose these two modes of dwelling as nomadic and sedentary, provided one admits that the sedentary mode has always been an option of the nomadic one. It has the disadvantage of suggesting that one is mobile and the other is fixed, which is decidedly not true, first because by always dwelling in the whole of their *nutag*, herder-hunters tend to paradoxically deny movement (cf. Humphrey 1995; Pedersen 2017), and second because the particular way Mongol people dwell in cities, at least in the contemporary period, is not devoid of a particular kind of movement (Højer and Pedersen 2019). Therefore, I would

rather call both of the ways of dwelling nomadic, distinguishing the second as the *hot* modality of nomadism.

It is indeed striking that cities are not the only instances of *hot* in Mongolia. As noted by Charlotte Marchina (2019: 40) and others, some rural encampments (*ail*) are called thus also (*hot ail*). A *hot ail* is often an encampment, as in the winter station, where permanent structures such as a sheep pens and storage sheds are accommodated. The winter camp, as a *hot ail*, was indeed managed according to different rules to the other camps in the Harhira-Türgen valleys where I stayed. Due to its infrastructure, its location never changed from one year to the other (as opposed to all the other camps) and my interlocutors did not hesitate to claim they had exclusive ownership (*ezemshil*) of their winter camp, which was inherited (so they said) through agnatic descent. Even the particular location on which the round felt tents were erected, called *buir*, was permanently fixed; the male members of an incoming family came a few days before they moved there to refresh it by turning over the first layer of soil (something which is explicitly prohibited in any other context).

Finally, and in striking contrast to other campsites I could visit, winter stations had borders, called *goirtog*, that delimited the portion of land around the pen, the shed and the felt tent which was used and occupied for the duration of the season. At the highest point of the camp, meanwhile, was the small cairn, used by the residents only, around which solemn offerings of meat, milk tea and alcohol were addressed to land masters on the first morning of the lunar new year. The area between this small cairn and the 'borders' was really the *hot ail*, and while it was not exactly a city, it definitely appeared as an exceptional concession to the otherwise undisputed mastery of *ezen savdag*. Everywhere else, in all non-*hot* contexts, Dörvöd herder-hunters seemed careful to maintain the fiction of not occupying any specific place within the whole space of the *nutag* through which they kept circulating.

GRAVES AS APPARATUSES OF DWELLING

Now, gravesites are essential elements to the upholding of this dwelling etiquette, first of all, and rather obviously, because the body of the dead person laid out in the open will ideally be dismembered, scattered and *disappeared* into their *nutag*. This is indeed the post-mortem fate that my interlocutors wished for most keenly, although they had nothing against being 'placed under the ground' if the lama thought it appropriate to upon opening the golden vessel (FM 2000–2008). The speed with which a body is eaten by animals – mainly carrion birds – is an index of how good the person has been during his or her life. When I was discussing this at some point at the beginning of 2022 with people in Ulaangom, they had a vivid memory of a particular occasion on which the body of a policeman of dubious reputation took several months to completely disappear, which came as a surprise to no one (FM 2022).

The gravesite itself, however, is a striking apparatus of invisibility. On the day of the funeral, the body of the deceased parent is not just laid out on its own in the open steppe. Next to it, a rock is placed, on which incense offerings to the deceased are left with the mortal remains. This rock is called a 'sign stone' (*temdeg chuluu*), which in itself is a curious statement, as the 'sign' it constitutes is of an ambiguous nature: devoid

of any inscription and barely distinguishable from any other rock in the vicinity, it marks without marking. Or rather, perhaps, what it marks is only readable by those to whom the information is intended, i.e. only members of the deceased person's family (indeed only those who took part in the ceremony) will be able to spot it again in the future, when commemorative gatherings will be carried out one year (or three years if the dead person is a woman) after the funeral, and on an irregular basis after that (Delaplace 2008). Even for them, the sign stone is not a trustworthy landmark. At all the commemorative events I have attended, these rocks have taken a long time to be found again, eliciting among men in charge of the ceremony some discussions, consultations, and negotiations; on two occasions at least, I have seen search parties end up choosing a stone that they had ruled out from the outset (FM 2004, 2009).

Sign stones are indeed powerful statements of invisibility, and as such they feel like a compelling illustration, I would say a crystallisation, of the Dörvöd herder-hunters' daily dwelling etiquette. Thanks to them, gravesites may appear to people who are meant to find them, while they remain virtually indistinguishable to others. Like the invisible things land masters are, these sign stones can only be recognised for what they are by some people, and not others, through an elaborate discursive and relational apparatus. There is a way in which gravesites allow herder-hunters effectively to take a position in the world they can only (fictively) claim, or aspire to, their whole life. Only through their grave will they be able to be placed somewhere (at their sign stone) without occupying it – only their gravesite will be theirs to inhabit while remaining under the ownership of land masters.

For rather long I have wondered why there were so few bones and human remains around the sign stones I could spot thanks to people who knew them. In the *salantai gazar*, where several dead bodies had been laid out in recent years, I was rather puzzled not to find the odd long bone, skull or jaw scattered around in the bush. After all, I could see some of the artefacts from the deceased person's possession left around the gravesite as "refuge things" (Humphrey 2002), and the presence or disappearance of which is checked at every commemoration. At some point, I even suspected my interlocutors had concealed a crucial detail from me when describing their funerary protocol. Perhaps they were performing second funerals today, as they had been doing in the past (Charleux 2015: 245–255) and came to collect the remaining bones in order to bury them somewhere. In 2015, I took it upon myself to confront my closest friends, pleading with them to tell me the truth now, if they had shied away from certain details beforehand. Honestly, I asked, were they coming back afterwards to the graves, before during or after the official commemorations I had witnessed, to collect what remained there? They assured me they did not. Then how come there were entire skeletons of horses, camels and yaks whitening away under the summer sun, and never human bones, even next to gravesites? Well, they replied, did I ever see skeletons of sheep, goats, or even dogs? I had to admit they were less frequent. You see, they continued, that is because they are smaller in size: as soon as they are sufficiently eaten and become light enough, vultures snatch them up to the top of the mountains, at the very heart of the *nutag*, so as to finish the feast in their nests. (FM 2015)

This revelation made me suddenly realise the extent of the concern and talent Dörvöd Mongolian people showed for *dwelling well*. Their gravesites were not just convenient and carefully chosen locations from which anybody's mortal remains could be

scattered into disappearance. They were not even just cunning devices of invisibility, whereby the sign stone, as a technique of ambivalent marking could effect a certain regime of presence and a delicate ethics of dwelling. They were also, perhaps most of all, a complex apparatus that brought together humans (that is, humans of different skills), horses, artefacts, and vultures, to ensure that a dead person placed next to the sign stone would be both here and on the summits that overlook their *nutag*. To ensure, in other words, that wherever they were placed on their gravesite, they would dwell on *at the heart* and *in the entirety* of their homeland, thus accomplishing for the dead person an ideal they could only fictively strive for during their life.

CONCLUSION

In this short anthropological exploration of people's concern (and talent) for the invisible in Mongolia, I have approached this concept – the invisible – from two different perspectives. On the one hand, I have reviewed some the apparatuses designed by Dörvöd herders (and other Mongol people) to tackle what they called 'invisible things' (*üzegdehgüi yum*): souls, revenants, ghosts, and other *current-shaped* spirits. On the other hand, I have extended this discussion to a certain register of things – a configuration of gravesites, a way of dwelling – that neither my own interlocutors nor any other Mongol person might be ready to call invisible, yet which seem *comparable* to the first ensemble of things they would readily recognise as such. The conditions under which adequate ethnographic comparison can be carried out, when thinking anthropologically about the invisible, have been discussed elsewhere (Delaplace 2022). Here, I would like to insist on something slightly different: the eventuality that ethnographic comparison might not be indexed on, or even rooted in, speech. This will be taken as an opportunity to say something about the language of the invisible.

I have a confession to make. As my knowledge of the Mongolian tongue progressed, and as I came to interact with people outside of the small network where I had conducted fieldwork during my first stays in Mongolia, I realised that *üzegdehgüi yum*, the expression I had taken to mean 'invisible things' in Mongolian, was not really used as such by anyone else. There were other terms, such as *ül üzegdeh züil*, or *hii üzegdel*, which were apparently more commonly used and more readily understood by my interlocutors throughout the country than *üzegdehgüi yum*. When I mentioned this expression, it was thought to be correct and understandable of course, but not intuitive. To my surprise, I came to realise upon my following visits that my Dörvöd interlocutors in Uvs would *also* prefer these other terms, although they had grown accustomed to employing *üzegdehgüi yum* with me, humouring me with a notion that I seemed to find interesting and which stuck with me (FM 2022). I could not help but feel a bit of shame and unease at the apparent imprecision and looseness of my ethnographic work, and fear crept in that what I had spent years studying with my Dörvöd friends might have been little more than an artefact: people had just been nice and considerate enough to give me what I had come to find. Even the words we used were fitted to the specific needs and the particular purpose of our interactions. They were a version of Mongolian cosmologies that was intended for me and adjusted to my understanding abilities.

Far from indexing a broader Mongolian reality, *üzegdehgüi yum* was therefore the result of an intercultural arrangement: a translation bricolage, an ethnographic pidgin that came to designate what my interlocutors and I were talking about when doing the work that justified my visits (and in which they were polite enough to show an interest). This does not mean, of course, that they *made up* what they told me about *üzegdehgüi yum*. It does mean however that ethnographic knowledge had been derived, in this occasion as in others probably, from an intersubjective, idiosyncratic process of invention (cf. Wagner 1975), which was only relatively pertinent and intelligible, which made only partial sense outside of the limits of our network. Then again, perhaps this is the kind of knowledge anthropology distinctively produces: localised strivings to describe the world across, and beyond, languages.

Distinguishing between vernacular concepts (such as *üzegdehgüi yum* or any other instance of ethnographic pidgin) and analytic terms (such as the invisible) is crucial to the anthropological method. The classic outcome of ethnography is indeed to *unsettle* pre-existing (Western) categories through local ways of thinking, encapsulated in meaningful and often untranslatable notions (*mana*, *hau*, *potlatch*, etc.), the showcasing and unpacking of which made the heyday of early social and cultural anthropology. The present paper followed a slightly different purpose, seeking practices of the invisible beyond what Mongolian people themselves called thus. Not that the uses surrounding the vanishing of the grave or the care for dwelling in a certain way, which we chose here to envisage and write about as invisible, would be called *otherwise* by my interlocutors. As far as I know from the many years spent tagging along with friends, hanging around and looking for the right ways to enquire about these things and others, they are not called at all. Some things are best performed in silence, and I have become aware that, in Mongolia at least, this is indeed the stuff the invisible is made of. Perhaps the following recollection will convey this idea better than anything else.

I used to know Javzan well when she was alive. Mother of eight, she seemed older than anyone I had met. She lived with her two youngest sons and, when they both got married, with her eldest. With the years she grew increasingly tired. She had almost ceased to get up from under a bunch of coats and blankets where she disappeared for most of the day. When she died in 2003, her eldest son took her to a *salantai gazar* at the entrance of the mountains. Her body vanished rapidly, supposedly, although the first commemorative visit to her sign stone, by another son and a daughter of hers, was six years afterwards. Around her grave site remained the refuge things: a white cooking pot and a green container she used for salt. We found them when we visited the place with a delegation of her daughters and sons, exceptionally reunited in Ulaangom, in the summer of 2015. We threw the two items in the air, as far as possible, hoping they would break more than they were already broken (FM 2015).

The sign stone was not easy to find. Javzan's son spotted it thanks to the five Tugrik coins he had left as an offering upon his last visit six years before. We sat a few steps away from the stone, below the space where the body had been laid to rest twelve years ago. A fire was lit, tea was cooked, alcohol was consumed. Offerings of milk were sprinkled. Some dried camel dung was crushed into a small heap on top of the sign stone and on three other stones around the space where the body could no longer be seen. The dung was lit, juniper powder scattered over the embers, and a column of smoke formed over the stones, surrounding the space where Javzan could now almost be imagined lying down.

All of us, one after the other, circumambulated the empty space, throwing barley, pieces of doughnut and morsels of sugar within it, thus covering the greenness of the grass with the pale yellowness and the whiteness of our offerings. As we rather joyfully drank our tea, ate doughnuts of our own and downed a few shots of vodka, I grew uncertain for whom these offerings were intended. Layering the surface of Javzan's grave site, they seemed explicitly directed to *her* of course. It was impossible not to see, however, that our offerings also came to re-present (re-suscitate almost) her body: she was almost here lying down beside us, in her body of grain, sugar and flour. Our gift seemed to be simultaneously *for* her, and *her*. Being tossed over her grave site, meanwhile, the abundance of foodstuff could not *not* be intended also for the animals that would obviously rush to devour it, just as they had picked Javzan's body to disappearance 12 years before.

As we prepared to leave, kites and crows could barely wait for us to be in the car before they flooded the grave site. Crowding the space where Javzan had lain, they emptied it out again as we set off. In the car, faces were relaxed, pensive and happy. Despite the alcohol and the warm sociality of our graveside picnic, we had a silent ride. Certainly, I could not be the only one who had *seen* Javzan vanish. A third time over since her funeral, she had been processed to invisibility by the astonishing multi-species apparatus of disappearance that a Mongolian grave may be.

NOTES

1 This, of course, leads to all sorts of problems (see Delaplace 2008: 274–278), both for diviners who fail to see what they are confronted with unexpectedly, and for seers who are helpless when cornered by revenants (*siins*) they can see but not send back or accommodate.

2 Taste may indeed be a channel of perception of the invisible across cultural settings: Heonik Kwon (2008) famously recounted the attention of his Vietnamese interlocutors for the saltiness of a particular drink of water, susceptible of revealing the presence of a ghost. See also Ludek Broz (2018) for examples in the Altai. While there are stories of exceptional people sharing food and drink with spirits, taste itself very seldom features in ghost stories I have come across in Mongolia.

3 One often hears in Ulaanbaatar today that what needs to be called back in case of sickness and/or persistent misfortune is the *süld*, often translated as vital force, not the soul (*süns*), as losing one's soul would result in immediate death (Højer and Pedersen 2019: 194–200).

4 On the use of arrows in rituals and the links between archery and divination see Delaplace and Legrain 2021.

5 The term *güidel* is used to designate all kinds of currents, including electric currents (*tsahilgaan güidel*; Tseveel 1966: 164; Bayarsaihan 2009: 168).

6 These rituals, usually reserved to male members of the community, have been described thoroughly throughout the ethnographic literature (see for example Humphrey and Onon 1996: 147–148; or Sneath 2000).

7 Interestingly, revenants, ghosts and land masters are all commonly said to be negatively affected by the presence of actual electricity: my interlocutors in Uvs agreed that land masters and ghosts manifested themselves more often and more patently – there were more of them – before electricity lines were pulled between district centres across the Harhira-Türgen valleys and other (home)lands. Importantly, my interlocutors pointed out that it is not light itself that was inductive of spirits' retreat, but electricity as a(n) (invisible) phenomenon: in Harhira Türgen

valleys, at the beginning of the 21st century herder-hunters had electricity through high-voltage lines, without light. (FM 2003)

8 Dörvöd people would only give offerings of food to ghosts in order to “satisfy” them and “send them away” (for example Delaplace 2014: 56).

9 The respiratory system, that is the trachea and lungs, are called *hülde* in Buryat, which may be compared to the modern Halha Mongolian *süld*, meaning vital force (a term often associated with *hiimor*, an important component of the Mongolian person, mainly for men, and of which horses are indeed thought to be an important source). Together with the respiratory system, some Mongol groups, for example the Daur, also display the cooked heart, liver, and spleen of the animal (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 195).

10 The indication given by Damdin that the chosen area, Öndör Güveen, was a place “where since long ago the dead had been disposed of” (Bawden 1994a [1977]: 260), hints that the place is what Dörvöd people call a *salantai gazar* (from the Tibetan *sa-langs* ‘to take the place’ and *gazar* ‘place’ in Mongolian). The study of funerary topography in the Harhira-Türgeen valleys revealed that a few places in the mountains were more suitable than others to lay people on the ground as “they had been taken long ago by a powerful lama”, according to my interlocutors (Delaplace 2008).

11 See Olędzski 1977 for a description of three different cemeteries in 1960s Socialist Mongolia: in the capital city Ulaanbaatar, in the Övörhangai provincial centre Harhorin and in Bayan district.

12 This could be considered just as an extension of Mongolian horse riding techniques, which rely on sound and vocal cues more than hand and heel signals (Marchina 2019): what the horse perceives of the rider peeing between its legs is the sound it makes. See also Hutchins 2019 for other sonic interfaces of human-animal relationship, in particular “lullaby-like” songs sung to convince ewes to suckle an orphaned offspring.

13 Meaning literally ‘team’, the term *bag* is a legacy of the collectivisation, when collective units of pastoral production were established as subdivisions of each district, with a ‘team centre’ (*bagiin töv*) that acted as an administrative relay of the central state, through the district and provincial centres.

SOURCES

FM = Author’s fieldwork material from 2000–2022, collected inUvs province (Ulaangom, Tarialan district, Ömnögov’ district) and more occasionally in Ulaanbaatar. Materials are kept in the author’s personal collection; the year of collection is mentioned as metadata in the text.

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