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Introduction

Isabelle Charleux & Marissa Smith

Many Mongolists have encountered the “*ovoo* phenomenon” in the course of their research and fieldwork. This special issue of EMSCAT takes an interdisciplinary perspective on *ovoos*, with contributions from historians, anthropologists, environmental scientists, archeologists, Buddhologists, and art historians. This project was made possible thanks to the “Mongolia Initiative”, especially by the Initiative’s director Caverlee Cary, at the Institute of East Asian Studies at UC Berkeley, and the France-Berkeley Fund, allowing us to organize a workshop and a conference in Berkeley in February 2019. The editors also solicited articles from contributors beyond the original conference, making the project grow, in *ovoo*-fashion.

On the one hand, the term *ovoo* refers to stone or earth heaps, sometimes with a central pole, a tuft, flagpoles or arrows, or tree trunks arranged in conical shape. On the other hand, the term also often refers to features of height on the landscape, “mountains”, both in the geological sense but in the cosmological one which also includes “masters” (Mo. *ezed*) with whom humans are in active relations. While this issue focuses on *ovoos*, which are found ubiquitously on the landscape of Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tuva, and Eastern Tibet/Qinghai, the topic is of interest beyond the field of Mongolian Studies. First of all, *ovoos* are clearly related to Tibetan cairns called *lab tse*¹, but are also related to stupas and often found among, alongside, and hybridized with, monumental structures including stupas. At the same time, cairns and relationships with mountains are present all over the world and *ovoos* are an interesting focus for comparative regional analyses. Finally, the “transitional” qualities of *ovoos* that we draw attention to in this issue are of interest to specialists and students of ritual, frontier studies, territorial administration, engagement with landscape, and history as accumulation in any region.

As expressed by Benedikte Lindskog,

¹ Written in Tibetan *lab tse*, *lab rtse*, *lab btsas*, *la btsas*, or *la rdzas*. As noted by Diemberger (2003), the equivalence between *lab tse* and *ovoo* deserves more study.

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The word *ovoo* means “heap” or “pile” (Evans & Humphrey 2003, p. 196). *Ovoolah* means to “heap up” and carries positive connotations linked to central conceptual values among Mongols, that of concentration or centring (*tövlöj*), “containing” (*aguulaj*) and the hierarchical superiority of that which is above (Mo. *deed*). The word *tarah*, meaning “to scatter”, can be seen as the antithesis of *obooloh*, and is associated with loss and dispersal [...]. The “centripetal” (Da Col & Humphrey 2012) ritual process involved during an *ovoo* offering is manifested through acts wherein “fortune” (Mo. *hishig*) is “tied” to objects and receives its force through accumulation, encircling and centering. (Lindskog 2016)

Conversely, Humphrey suggests a linguistic link between the word *ovoo* and *ovoohoi*, which means refuge, or shelter. According to her, this is because *ovoo* rituals enact a kind of “closing up and binding in” (Humphrey 1995, p. 148).

While some *ovoos* are built in architectural, structured, forms with connections to Buddhist stupas (Mo. *svraga*) and mandalas (Mo. *mandal*), they are also never to be completed. As Tim Ingold writes, “unlike the long forgotten object possibly deposited inside it, the mound is still mounding” (Ingold 2010, p. 258). For Davaa-Ochir, the act of adding stones symbolizes “the participation of worshippers to the continuous creation of the sanctuary dedicated to the master spirits” (Davaa Ochir 2008, p. 53). As also emphasized in a number of contributions to this volume, the act of adding stones is also an act of engagement with the landscape and its denizens, and their proper ordering (see the article by Delaplace and Legrain in this issue for discussion of related practices with this function). As Jessica Madison Piskatá writes, the relationship between *ovoos* and components of *ovoos* is “a process of accretion (Smith 2015) by which energy, fortune and value are collected, consolidated, and redistributed via a system of intensifying exchange in which the material is collected (as stones, sand, wood, etc.) and the immaterial is redistributed (as fortune, destiny, energy, value, etc.)”.

Travelers in Mongolia are generally introduced to and participate in the process of physically adding stones or objects to “roadside *ovoos*”. But *ovoo* also refers to many mountains themselves, for example the “Golden Mountain” (Mo. Altan Ovoo) of the Dariganga region of south-east Mongolia, in Sühbaatar Province (Madison Piskatá, this issue), or the “Treasure Mountain” (Mo. Erdenetiin Ovoo) between the Selenge and Orhon Rivers in north central Mongolia (Smith 2015; also Charleux, this issue; Bilegsaikhan 2017a, 2017ab). *Ovoos* have a mimetic relationship with the mountain: “the monuments do not break with the natural topography. Basically, it seems that the mounds were built with the twofold purpose of being seen and appearing as natural features in the landscape [...], thereby enhancing their symbolic and visual connection with the mountains” (Dal Zovo 2015, p. 140). *Ovoos* and stupas “were probably intended to incorporate the substance of Mongolian mountains, through the construction materials, the stones, the location pattern and architectonic shape” (*ibid.*, p. 140). But then again, as elaborated on in this issue by Watters, there is also a connection between *ovoos* and hearths (Mo. *otgon*) as focal points of sociability.

The great scalar range on which the *ovoo* concept operates also relates to the slippage between everyday, individual acts at “roadside *ovoos*” on the one end of the spectrum, and the highly coordinated “state

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ovoo” ceremonies (Mo. *tahilga*) performed by the president of Mongolia that are organized since the beginning of the 1990s on the other. Using De La Cadena’s (2010) concept of “cosmopolitics”, David Sneath highlights the highly political character of collective *ovoo* rituals that are an occasion for displaying the hierarchical social statuses of the participants and thus reenacting socio-political hierarchies (Sneath 2014). The *ovoo* has been defined as a “key aspect of traditional culture,” registered on the UNESCO Cultural Heritage list². An *ovoo* has even been built in the courtyard of the Mongolian Embassy in France. In accordance with their function of ordering and the political character of such ordering, there are often, ideally at least, restrictions on whom may interact with which *ovoos* under what conditions, leading some to occasionally claim or attempt to assert that *ovoos* are categorically only built and otherwise interacted with by persons of particular genders, religions, or ethno-territorial identities. However, intrinsic to their form and nature is that *ovoos* may potentially be built anywhere, of anything, by anyone, composed of and composing any set of relations (including with other *ovoos*).

But again, “transitioning” between these extremes, there are also more local “cult *ovoos*”, that are in fact not local so much as scalar, situating their participants in relation to “higher levels” in both territorial-administrative terms as well as cosmological ones. Reasons to build *ovoos* are many and they carry different meanings: while their main function is to serve as altars to propitiate the master-spirits of the land with seasonal sacrifices, *ovoos* are also built to appease roaming souls (Hutchins’s article in this issue), to commemorate historical events or historical figures (Dumont, this issue), to properly conduct difficult and dangerous activities (Smith, this issue) and so on, and also function as landmarks to orientate oneself. In the case discussed by Sam H. Bass, an absence of *ovoo* ritual correlates with the unusual position of the Erküüt vis-à-vis others in their banner community. Jessica Madison Pískatá writes of the disruption of a local *ovoo* ceremony due to weather, related to the improper presence of people from the national capital (both too many polluting vehicles from the polluted Ulaanbaatar, and the postponement of national-level ceremonies by the state). Aurore Dumont describes with great ethnographic and historical detail how it has been with local *ovoo* ceremony that Buryats who migrated from Russia to northeastern China in the 1920s have maintained a distinct group identity in the course of many categorical erasures by the national administration and built *ovoos* to secure their appropriation of a territory³. Isabelle Charleux’s survey of manuscript maps from the late Qing (1644-1911) shows the variability present among particular documents that were created to adhere to a strict form dictated by the imperial administration – “boundary *ovoos*” too are highly and multiply “transitional”. *Ovoos* are not considered as being “architecture”⁴. They are periodically rebuilt (and were massively rebuilt⁵, sometimes at different

2 In 2006, China included *ovoo* worship in its own list of intangible cultural heritage and created the concept of “*ovoo* culture” (Ch. *aobao wenhua* 敖包文化).

3 As expressed Caroline Humphrey (1995, p. 146), *ovoos* are a way of saying “We are here”.

4 Classical books on Mongolian architecture such as Maidar ([1970] 1972) present the yurt, Buddhist temples and stupas, modern 20th century architecture as well as ruins of cities and deer stone, but not *ovoos*.

5 Huge amounts of money are “invested” in construction and rituals (see for example Dumont 2017, p. 208).

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places, after their almost complete destructions in socialist Mongolia, Buryatia and Inner Mongolia). As noted in Valeria Gazizova in this issue, and elsewhere by Bilegsaikhan (2017a, 2017b), Charlier (2015, 2016), and Empson (2011), single stones as well as mountains can also move and be moved, at least in the form of *ovoos* and components of *ovoos*.

As foci of historical periodization, *ovoos* are still also omnipresent, often as “transitional”. Ninth century thaumaturgist Padmasambhava is sometimes credited as having performed the first *ovoo* ritual. *Ovoos* are nowadays depicted on Mongolian stamps picturing the Xiongnu (3rd century BC to the late 1st century AD) and on the cover of books on the Mongolian empire (such as May 2018). While *ovoos* are not attested in written sources from the medieval period, mountain cults are attested (see Chinggis Khaan's propitiation of Burkhan Khaldun in *The Secret History of the Mongols*). Archaeologist Cecilia Dal Zovo has documented ritual practices at stone cairns and prehistoric mounds of the Bronze and Iron Ages and explored their relation to tombs⁶. Her article in this collection, along with Valeria Gazizova's, also describe and analyze contemporary connections made between *ovoos* and burials (especially the Mo. *hirigsüür*).

Given their continuous presence, *ovoos* unsurprisingly figure prominently in contemporary processes of social and wider environmental upheaval. As expresses KG Hutchins in his article, “*ovoo* worship is tied to a discrete set of social relationships between particular people, mountains, spirits, and animals”. The articles in this special issue take seriously *ovoo*-related practices that combine Buddhism, shamanism and popular religion, lie between private and public religious practices, are influenced as well by global New Age trends and shamanism, and involve recent reinvention and re-archaization of *ovoo* rituals (see especially the articles by Gazizova and Hutchins). The volume also attends to the utilization of *ovoos* in the highly secular and economic: issues of ownership of land, the mining industry, ecological conservation and natural resource management. Rebecca Watters' article on environmental conservation shows how Mongols have to negotiate the boundaries between foreign expectations linked to an alternative understanding of landscape, and Mongolian ideals.

While aware of the impossibility of covering all aspects of *ovoos* and their worship, our objective is rather that of providing a series of insights into a few relevant topics concerning sacred geography and the origin of *ovoos*, their various meanings and political function, humans' engagement with *ovoos* and their relation to the land, environment, and heritage.

⁶ *Ovoos* are not tombs but are not unrelated to ancestors whose tombs are also located near mountain summits. Though *ovoos* are generally not places of human burial, they may house relics of ancestors (Evans & Humphrey 2003; Dal Zovo 2015; Dumont 2017).

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