

From the countryside to the city, missing the homeland among new migrants near and in Ulaanbaatar

Abstract

Since the end of socialism in Mongolia, migration processes have dramatically increased. The lack of investment in the rural infrastructures and the repetition of *zud* have pushed the most vulnerable herders towards the capital, Ulaanbaatar, and its outskirts. They encounter tremendous difficulties to have access to private property and seem condemned to move relentlessly from enclosure to enclosure (*hashaa*) in the hope of finding a less precarious place to settle in the city. The main purpose of this article is to show how difficult it is for some families of herders to leave their homeland and to settle in another place. I will first describe these difficulties from the point of view of the relationships women and men entertain with the spirits of the land, *savdag*, after migrating to a new place. I will then try to show how the realization of homeland paintings (*nutgyn zurag*) help, to some extent, to maintain relationships with these spirits and the homeland as a whole. Finally, I will describe the impossibility for some new migrants to settle permanently and to get used to the city of Ulaanbaatar, *dasah*.

Keywords

Mongolia, herders, migration, homeland, attachment, detachment

Introduction

A few years ago I started a reflection on the Mongolian herders' attachment to a piece of land they call their "homeland", *törsön nutag* (Charlier 2015a; 2015b; 2019: 177-190).¹ I have suggested the hypothesis according to which the relationship between the herders and their homeland is not only established at birth but has to be entertained through the mobility of the herders and their animals, and the accomplishment of rituals to the spirits of the land, *savdag*. Some of these rituals are carried out by women and some others by men. Throughout the year,

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

every morning and evening, at each encampment, women offer milk libations to the *savdag* of the place. Each year, at the new-year ceremony, men offer them pieces of meat, milk and alcohol libations in order to attract their protection and good climatic conditions. The description of these rituals conveys the idea according to which the notion of homeland should not be understood as a bounded territory but rather as a network of relationships the herders entertain with other herders, but also with their herd animals and the local *savdag* (section 1).

With the passing of time, the accomplishment of the rituals create an attachment so strong that it becomes difficult for the elders to leave their homeland. If they leave their homeland for too long, it said that the *savdag* will long for them, *sanah*, and withdraw their protection. The elders might then die quickly. In a similar way, some elders who have left their homeland to move to another province or settle in the city use the verb “to long for” to refer to their relationship with the *savdag*. The questions I want to ask in this article are: how do these herders keep maintaining their relationships with the *savdag* left behind and the homeland as a whole? And how do these *savdag* are slowly replaced by others belonging to a new territory and finally fall into oblivion? (section 2)

The background of my research is the migration of the herders to the city. The reasons of their migration since the end of the socialist era as well as the consequences on the ecology and the urban environment have been analysed in depth by different authors (Bruun 2006: 162-184; Sneath 2006: 140-161; Humphrey and Sneath 1999; Mayer 2015: 277-294, Plueckhahn 2017: 91-109). I will focus here on the way the herders who have migrated maintain some relationships with the homeland and how these relationships change through time and space. In other words, I will be interested in how the herders who migrate maintain and develop, or not, a sense of belonging to a particular place. Following Humphrey’s idea (1999a: 192), “Clearing a plot and fencing a plot implies a kind of particularised attachment to land that is different from the more general sense of belonging to a homeland (*nutag*) of pastoralists”. Moving to a new place is always a big change. I would like to show how difficult it is for some families of herders to leave their homeland and to settle in another place. I will first describe these difficulties from the point of view of the relationships women and men entertain with the spirits of the land after migrating to a new place. I will then try to show how the realization of homeland paintings (*nutgyn zurag*) help, to some extent, to maintain relationships with these spirits and the homeland as a whole (section 3). Finally, I will describe the impossibility for some new migrants to settle permanently and to get used to the city of Ulaanbaatar, *dasah* (section 4).

Bruun (2006: 176) and other authors (Barth 1964; Salzman 1980, Sneath 1999: 218-277) distinguish two separate processes by which herders leave their native lands and settle down. One is chosen and another is forced. The former converts the self-generating and highly vulnerable animal capital into more secure forms of capital such as trucks, land, jewellery and urban housing in order for the household to move to the city. The latter, which is the most common, consists of households forced to stop their herder's life because of unsustainable herds or mass loss of animals due to disasters, pests, or even thefts. These herders may leave the steppe temporarily but re-entry into herding is seriously restrained by inadequate rural finance. The herders I am going to talk about here belong to the second category. They have been forced, for different reasons, to move to the province centre, another province closer to the capital, or to the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. Each migratory trajectory is singular and the conclusions I draw from the analysis of these trajectories can apply to other situations only to some extent.

This article is an assemblage of different sets of data collected between 2007 and 2017. I will first analyse the situations of two families from Uvs who have left their homeland to move to the province centre of Ulaangom and the province of Selenge, near the capital. I know these families since my first fieldwork in 2007. In 2015 and 2017, I could meet them again after they had moved to their new places. The long time spent among these families allowed me to collect the personal feelings of different household members about their migratory trajectories, their homeland left behind and the places they live in now. Other stories on recent and less recent migrations collected in the yurt district and in the city centre in 2017 are examined in the fourth section. They concern five unrelated families, or rather family members from Övöhangai, Hentii, and Dundgov', who migrated to Ulaanbaatar and its outskirts. These new migrants have no access to private property.

1. Entertaining the relationships with the spirits of the land

I will start this article in 2007 when Nadmid and Cecegbal, a couple of herders from the province of Uvs had a discussion with their son, Dorjoo, and their son-in-law, Bayanmonkh. Both of them wanted to migrate to Ulaanbaatar to work as taxi drivers. Nadmid and Cecegbal told them that it was difficult to get used to a new place. They repeated several times the expression: "dassan gazaryn dawuu zöölön", the sweet cloth of a well-known place. Cecegbal explained how difficult it was to leave her homeland as she got older. She had a few relatives

in the capital city but did not want to move away, she preferred to stay with her very old mother, her brothers and sisters who lived in Ulaangom, the province centre. She said:

“When you become old it is not good to go far away from your homeland because the spirits of the land (*savdag*) will not protect you anymore. Far from our homeland we will die quickly. My father, my grand-father and my mother have lived here. Now this is the homeland of my son. If we go far away from the *savdag*, they will long for us (*sanah*) and withdraw their protection. I have offered milk libations to them all my life.”

At each encampment, in the morning and in the evening, Cecegbal offered the first milk from the cattle to the *savdag*. She also recited prayers to different *savdag* according to the encampment where she stayed with her family. As she said:

“When we are near the lake Üüreg, I pray for the *savdag* of the lake and the mountain *Cagaan Shuvuut*. At the autumn and winter encampments I pray for a spring nearby named *Heveg* and a mountain stream named *Cagduult*. At the spring encampment, Ulaan Davaa, I pray for a spring named *Belyn bulag*. When I don’t know the *savdag* of the place I just mention the name of the area in my prayers.”

When she prayed in the morning and in the evening and made milk libations in the four directions, Cecegbal repeated the names of the *savdag* living in the territories visited throughout the year:

My 33 sky deities and inferior lus

The guardian spirits of my father, mother, father-in-law and mother-in-law’s destinies

My mountain Cagaan Shuvuut

My lake Üüreg, spring Heveg, mountain Cagd

My Bairam Baadaa (name of the summer encampment) where the willow trees grow quickly

Cöög! Beloved ones

My multiple national emblems

My Cagaan Aav (White Father, well known *savdag* in Uvs)

My master Buddha

May quarrel be absent

My destiny

May the technology evolve without obstacle

Be those (*my savdag*) which shelter children and relatives from curses

Be those which ensure the children a happy life

The attachment to the *savdag* was reasserted during the New Year ceremony in early spring when the men of the household went to pray at the *ovoo* of the winter encampment. As Gregory Delaplace says, the winter encampment is often considered to be the encampment of the lineage, *udmyn övöljöö* (2008: 147). It is the only encampment privately owned. The right to use it is attributed and transmitted through the paternal line. In the morning, Nadmid and his son, Dorjoo, went to the small *ovoo* made of stones located to the east of the yurt. Nadmid had taken a few ambers from the hearth, some wood and a bowl of flour mixed with juniper powder. Dorjoo hold a plate with pieces of boiled mutton, the shoulder blade and the first four ribs. I hold a thermos of milk tea and a plate containing dried doughnuts, sweets, sugar and small pieces of white cheese, orange and green ribbons. A bush had been hung with ribbons. Afterwards, Nadmid and Dorjoo made milk, alcohol and meat offerings and turned clockwise around the *ovoo*. They recited some prayers:

My rich mountain (Buyan Altai)

My heroic red savdag

My indulgent Cagaan Aav

The old year has passed

A new year begins

A fruitful year has passed

The new year has come

The old year has passed

Cöög cöög! Beloved ones

As they were praying, Nadmid and Dorjoo tossed milk and pieces of meat into the air and into the fire. After tossing the meat and milk, Nadmid and Dorjoo kneeled three times and Nadmid said to Dorjoo: *Mend uu?* How are you doing? Then they exchanged snuff bottles and greeted each other asking and answering:

Have the cattle ended the year in good health?

-The cattle are healthy

Have the cattle ended the year fat and beautiful?

-The cattle has ended the year fat and beautiful

We drank some milk tea and vodka and came back to the yurt.

The range of *savdag* mentioned in Nadmid's and Dorjoo's prayers is quite limited in comparison with the amount of *savdag* mentioned by Cecegbal during her daily prayers. The only occasion when Nadmid and Dorjoo mentioned more *savdag* in their prayers was during

the ceremony of the small administrative entity named “bag”. Each year, in June, all the men belonging to a particular *bag* go to an *ovoo* on a mountain and pray for the local *savdag*. All the men walk to the top of the mountain where we can see a large and a small *ovoo*. A cavity is fashioned on the big *ovoo*’s top containing a wooden box with religious books. Opening it is forbidden. In front of the box there are three bowls of milk, five sheep’s ankle bones and a small pile of juniper powder. Nobody play with the ankle bones. At the *ovoo*, Nadmid and Dorjoo prayed and flung milk into the air and onto the *ovoo*. They turned three times around it and tied a ceremonial scarf around a branch. Afterwards, they burned juniper powder on the smaller *ovoo* next to the larger one. They came back to the big *ovoo*, kneeled and Dorjoo and Nadmid recited the following prayers:

My Bayanhairhan (name of a mountain)

My Cagaan Aav

My hero god of the mountain

My mountain Cagaan Shuvuut and lake Üüreg

May you deign to be merciful

May you, my mountain spring, care for me

Some of the men included more *savdag* from other districts and even beyond the national boundary, confirming Morten Pedersen (2009: 143) s’idea developed about the Duha according to which: “What distinguishes a given point in this nomadic landscape (...) is the impure mixture of distinct places, not a purist demarcation into distinct spaces”. This was the case of Batmaa and his brothers, who were the neighbours of Nadmid in summer and who prayed for Cagaan Aav, the mountain Cagaan Shuvuut, a mountain named Hanhohii located in southern Ulaangom, the lake Üüreg, the mountain Deglii Cagaan located near Ulaangom, the mountain range Hoh Serhiin Nuruu located on the south side of lake Üüreg, the mountain range Altai Hangai that arises in the province of Bayan Ölgii, and the mountain Möngön Tayag located in Tuva. As a sign of respect, they pronounced the names of these *savdag* as correctly as possible and said:

May quarrel be absent

May I be without disease and healthy

May I be happy and wealthy

May I live successfully (with *hiimor'*)

Beloved ones

But the question I want to ask now is: what does this attachment to these spirits of the land become when people migrate to another place far from their homeland?

2. Leaving the *savdag* behind and creating new relationships

In 2011 when I came back to Uvs for the first time since 2007, I met Cecegbal, who had moved from the district of Sagil where she lived in the steppe to the provincial centre Ulaangom. She had actually settled in the administrative centre after Nadmid and Dorjoo died in terrible circumstances one year earlier. Dorjoo had a car accident and his father passed away a few months later soon after falling from his horse. In the beginning, Cecegbal did not want to leave the place where her son and husband's bodies had been laid on the ground in a nearby sunny hill. She became a source of worries for her relatives. "How can a 75-year old lady survive on her own in the steppe, there are so many drunkards and cattle thefts in the area?" asked relentlessly her daughter, but Cecegbal did not care, she did not want to move away. One of his younger brothers finally decided to come and live with her to pasture the herd and move again, from one encampment to another. In summer anyway, Cecegbal's brother would go back to his family near Ulaangom and her grandchildren would come and spend their summer holidays with her, milking the cows, making cheese, cleaning the yurt and pasturing the sheep. It took Cecegbal almost two years to decide to settle in Ulaangom where her daughter has a small house. Then, she did not want to go back to the lake Üüreg near the mountain Cagaan Shuwuut where she lived before, even to visit relatives, to participate in a wedding ceremony or to attend the naadam of Sagil because there were too many painful memories left over there. She did not want to go back at the ovoo located at the high pass separating the district of Sagil and Ulaangom where she used to offer milk and alcohol libations to Cagaan Aav, the lake Üüreg

and Cagaan Shuvuut any time she passed by. In summer, Nadmid used to plant sticks with prayer flags. He and his son would also hang pieces of ears of the newborn kids, lambs and calves to attract the good fortune (*hishig*) from the *savdag*. Dorjoo used to play with the ankle bones of a cow left near the *ovoo* as he wanted to know whether we would be fortunate in a near future.

Picture 1

After her husband's death, Cecegbal did not want to pray at this *ovoo* anymore but nevertheless she kept maintaining the relationships with the *savdag* of her homeland and every morning and evening, in the yard of her daughter's house, she recited exactly the same prayers to the *savdag* as she did when she was living in the steppe. As if she kept repeating again and again the same journey through the steppe by pronouncing carefully the names of the *savdag* at each of her former encampments. Six years later, when I met her again in 2017, she had not sold the enclosure and the small shed of her winter encampment yet, although nobody used them and nobody prayed at the *ovoo* anymore. Her prayers to the *savdag* had slightly changed. During the six years she had been living in the province centre she had felt the necessity of adding in her daily prayers several *savdag* of Ulaangom such as the mountain Deglii Cagaan, the mountain Ulaan Uul, the mountain Harhiraa and the lake Uvs. The attitude of Cecegbal towards the new *savdag* underlines how much time is important to initiate relationships with other *savdag*.

The difficulty to entertain relationships with the *savdag* of a new place is visible among some new migrants in the capital city. This is the case of a 65-year old herder I met in 2017 who lost all his herd because of a *zud*. He had migrated from the province of Dundgov' six months ago and settled in the yurt district in the capital city. He did not want to pray to the *savdag* at one of the *ovoos* of Ulaanbaatar as he missed (*sanah*) too much the *savdag* of his homeland. If he could, he would go back to his winter encampment and pray to the spirits of the land. He did not want to pray to the *savdag* of the capital because he was not from the place. Furthermore, the *savdag* of Ulaanbaatar was, according to him, an alcoholic and difficult old man and anyway, he was still under the protection of the *savdag* of his homeland. But maybe some day he would go to an *ovoo* of the city to ask for protection to the old and alcoholic *savdag*.

Some younger people who have recently migrated also refuse to go to the *ovoo* of the place. Baljav, a 40-year old herder whom I met about 10 years ago in Uvs lived in the same district as Cecegbal, in Sagil, with his father Chuluunbaatar, his mother Yanjimaa and his three brothers. In 2010 they lost half of their herd because of a *zud* and decided to migrate to the province of Selenge closer to the capital. Baljav decided to give up his herder's life and settled in Ulaanbaatar in the yurt district where he had been working as a plumber for the last five years. Two years ago, when I met him at New Year, he did not want to go to the *ovoo* on a nearby hill to pray to the *savdag* of Ulaanbaatar. He preferred to go to the winter camp of his father and pray to the *savdag* of his homeland. In Selenge, in his new winter camp, Chuluunbaatar had just made a small *ovoo* with snow, although he could have made it with the stones around the place. As if an *ovoo* made of stones would have accounted for a more permanent presence as he wanted to. The ceremony was the same as the one I had observed several years earlier with Nadmid and Dorjoo. Chuluunbaatar did not pray to the *savdag* of Selenge because he did not know their names. He kept praying to the *savdag* of Sagil like he did at his winter encampment. He recited:

My rich mountain

My mountain Cagaan Shuvuut

My indulgent Cagaan Aav

The old year has passed

A new year begins

A fruitful year has passed

The new year has come

The old year has passed

Cöög cöög! Beloved ones

Some traces of the *savdag* of the new place only timidly appeared in Yanjima's daily prayers. After living seven years in Selenge, she had only added two mountains of Selenge in her daily prayers. In the morning she recited:

My 33 sky deities and 77 inferior lus!

The guardian spirits of my father, mother, father-in-law, mother-in-law, husband, and children's destinies,

My Cagaan Aav, guardian spirit of my homeland's destiny

Ensure the growth of my herd

In the evening, the prayer was longer. She just mentioned two mountains of the area where she is now living before reciting the prayers to the *savdag* of Sagil. For the *savdag* of Selenge, she just said:

My mountains Hongor ovoo and Naran ovoo,

Take us under your protection

And afterwards, Yanjima carried on with the prayers to the *savdag* of Sagil:

My homeland

My parents who have raised me

The land of my birthplace

My rivers as vast as the ocean flowing from the mountains that have provided me with water

My mountain Cagaan Shuvuut, which has become an old man

My lake Üüreg that provides drinkable water

My mountain Cagaan Shuvuut, the *savdag* of my homeland

From your summit

Protect the three families by keeping the diseases away

By fulfilling them with laughter of happiness

By keeping all the bad things away

By bringing all the best things

By keeping all the curses away

My Cagaan Aav, the *savdag* of my homeland

Keep us, who are so far away, under your protection

These examples account for the difficulties to initiate relationships with new *savdag* and to forget the *savdag* left behind. Sometimes, reciting prayers is not enough to maintain relationships with the spirits of the land left behind. Some families ask painters to realize a painting of their homeland where the *savdag* reside.

3. Realizing paintings and photos of the homeland, and slowly forgetting the *savdag*

In the family of Chuluunbaatar and Yanjima, the relationships with the *savdag* of the homeland were not only entertained through the daily prayers of Yanjima and the annual prayers of Chuluunbaatar at the *ovoo* of the winter camp. They were also reminded through the presence of two pictures placed near and on the domestic altar of the yurt and implicitly associated with the prayers and the *ovoo*. After Chuluunbaatar and Yanjima had moved, their son Baljav had offered them a painting of the mountain Cagaan Shuvuut, which is one of the main *savdag* of Sagil, with the lake Üüreg and Cagaan Aav. At the bottom of the painting placed on the domestic altar, there is the picture of a Buddhist protecting divinity². Near to that painting on a shelf, a photomontage represents the ancestors, the winter camp area and famous wrestlers from Uvs.

Picture 2

² It might also be a *savdag*. It is difficult to say as I did not pay attention to the small picture when I took the photo.

Picture 3

The photomontage is located between the painting of Cagaan Shuwuut and a photography of consecrated horse, and a picture of Cagaan Aav. The painting and the photography seem to be objects of memory rather than ritual artefacts devoted to the attraction of spirits' protection.

Picture 4

Picture 5

Yanjimaa says that she looks at the painting of Cagaan Shuwuut and of her winter encampment when she misses her homeland. She remembers the yurts, the enclosure and the wooden shed of the encampment. She also remembers the trees on the surrounding hills and the presence of many wild animals. In Chuluunbaatar and Yanjima's family, the act of looking at and contemplating the pictures has become a way of triggering memories about the homeland and the *savdag* left behind rather than interacting with them. The presence of these images on and near the domestic altar seems to confirm Caroline Humphrey's reflections on the Mongolian ways of relating to the landscape when she says (1995, p. 135):

« In Mongolian culture itself landscapes are more in the nature of practice designed to have results: it is not contemplation of the land (*gazar*) that is important but interaction with it, as something with energies far greater than the human »

The presence of famous wrestlers on the photomontage reminds the spectator of the homeland as source of *hiimor*’, a place where you can revitalize yourself, “hiimoree sergeeh”, but the picture itself does not bring any *hiimor*’. Both pictures account for the absence of the owners in the figured landscape and a slow process of detachment. The aesthetics of the pictures itself, which is reminiscent of the landscape paintings, underline the feeling of separation. The main topic is the land, represented in a realistic way, rather than the humans living in it. In the painting, the spectator can only see a few yurts from afar (a scene of everyday life) and in the photography, the wrestlers are only there to show how full of *hiimor*’ the winter encampment is. The realistic dimension of these pictures and the secondary role played by humans reinforce the feeling of exteriority and detachment of the spectator in front of two pieces of land left behind.

The location of the picture on the family chest, which is also the domestic altar, is evocative. It is near the photographs and portraits of ancestors, relatives, and friends, who are either absent or deceased. This location is reminiscent of what Empson (2011: 147) says about the family chest inside the houses of Buriat families where:

Photographs, portraits, and embroideries displayed inside the house reveal people embedded in relations with others. (...) The chest’s visible surface creates a platform on which people, who may be absent from each other, are made to appear together in a single site.

In the context of migration, the presence of the picture on the altar accounts for one more separation, which is the separation with the homeland, and more precisely the homeland of Yanjima’s husband, epitomized by the photomontage of the winter encampment (the lineage encampment). What is made visible and entertained is the patrilineal link with the homeland. As Empson argues (2011: 107): “Tending to the different components of the chest is also the means by which relations are created.” In the case of Yanjima’s family, this relation takes the form of an external view of the homeland, rather than an effective presence in it.

Sometimes the figurative representation of the homeland and the *ovoos* in it seems to be *a priori* the last stage of the relationship of a family and the *savdag* of their homeland, which fell into oblivion.

Picture 6

This is the case of a family I met in Ulaanbaatar. They migrated from the province of Övöhangai to the capital city 30 years ago. A painting of the husband's homeland with the *ovoos* on the hills is not located on the family's domestic altar but decorates the corridor of their Russian apartment. It was painted almost 15 years ago when the man started to miss deeply his homeland. Eight years ago, a new painting of his homeland took place in his living room, interestingly, without reference to any *ovoo*.

Picture 7

These paintings of the homeland (*nutgyn zurag*) do not have any ritual dimension. Neither the husband of the family nor the wife remember the names of the *savdag* of their homeland. The wife prays only for the *savdag* of Ulaanbaatar and when the husband goes to one of the *ovoos* of Ulaanbaatar, he prays only to the *savdag* of the capital city. Contrary to the painting and the photography of Chuluunbaatar and Yanjima, the painting of this family, who migrated a long time ago, represents their homeland rather than the spirits living in it.³

With the passing of time, the link with the homeland does not depend on the relationships with the *savdag* anymore. This link is entertained through the actualization of memories related to particular places of the homeland. This is the case of an 80-year old Buriat man, whom I met in Ulaanbaatar three years ago, and who kept entertaining some relationships with the homeland he had left about sixty years ago. He did not know the name of any *savdag* over there but he had realized a drawing and a painting of his homeland. He had spent most of his life in Ulaanbaatar where he had worked as an engineer. Now he is filling dozen of pages with his handwriting to tell his biography and that of his family to transmit his memories to his children and grandchildren. When I asked if I could take a picture of the drawing of his homeland, he started talking about the history of this drawing.

³ However, both of them want to be buried in Övöhangai after their death.

Picture 8

As he said, as an engineer he knew how to make “rigorous” drawings and he started to draw a sketch of the future painting. He knew exactly what he wanted to be present in the drawing, which river, which houses, which yurt and mountain and which path. Afterwards, from the drawing he had made, he realized the painting.

Picture 9

Later, as he wanted to have another painting from a professional artist, he asked a friend of him, who is a painter, to realize it:

Picture 10

Now, in his living room there are two paintings and one drawing of his homeland. What he was eager to talk about was the path we can see on the drawing and the paintings. He described with his finger the way his grandfather and his father travelled when they crossed the border from Russia to Mongolia in the early twenties. On the painting, he could also show the place where his grandfather was killed by Mongolian soldiers at that time. He even pointed out the places of two monasteries in hills destroyed by communists. He remembered a place where he could find some good handmade alcohol. He also indicated where the yurt of his father and mother was. For this old Buriat man, the painting of his *nutag* did not refer to his relationships with some *savdag*, nor did it have only a decorative and representational dimension, it carried historical and family tragic memories to be passed down from generation to generation. By describing his *nutag* painting, the old man recreated some personal and cultural knowledge of the past. To some extent, the evocative potential of his painting is reminiscent of some shamanic sessions among the Buriats. As the spirits possess one by one a shaman, different components

of their narratives map the lost ancestral lands, lengthen and mend genealogies disrupted by socialism, and revive the Buryats' suppressed memories. As Buyandelger (2013: 18) argues: "The ultimate work of shamans is reconstituting the past, however, is not history, but memory – knowledge of the past that is emotionalized, embodied, and attached to an individual."

4. From *dasah* to *baraadah*, two ways of relating with places among new migrants in the city

What the relationships with the *savdag* and the homeland paintings seem to reveal is how long it takes to get used to a place, *dasah*, or to use Cecegbal's words, to make a well-known place as sweet as a soft cloth: "Dassan gazaryn dawuu zöölön".

The analysis of this aphorism by Laurent Legrain (2015: 47) in his book on the Darhad attachment to chants fits particularly well with the process at stake here. A well-known place may be thought of as a well-worn cloth. According to Legrain, the aphorism refers to the sweetness of a second skin, similar to a cloth that has softened with time, and a process of habituation. He says:

One of the meaning of *dasah* also refers to a process, which consists in becoming similar (*idjildeh*) or intimate (*dotno boloh*, literally "becoming internal"). But perhaps, it is less a process of incorporation in the sense of making internal an external reality, which is at stake here, than a reciprocal harmonizing process between two realities, which may be either two individuals, or an individual and an environment (including natural objects, artefacts or other people) – as it is the case for the *nutag*. (my translation)

The use of the verb *dasah* seems to qualify a very long process, maybe an entire life. Slowly adding the names of new *savdag* in one's daily prayers, refusing to pray at one of the capital's *ovoo*, wishing to be buried in one's homeland, or even painting it, account for the difficulties

to harmonize the relationships not only with one's homeland, but also with the place we live in now.

The discourses of some of the new migrants in the capital city, especially the most impoverished ones, who do not have access to private property to settle permanently, account for these difficulties. One of the most frequent way of referring to their relationships to the city is: “Bi hotod dasahgüi bain”. The 65-year old man who does not want to pray for the alcoholic *savdag* of the capital used the expression: “bi hotod ideeshihgüi bain”. The verb *ideeshih* can be translated as “to get used to”, “to be familiar with”. Sometimes *dasah* and *ideeshih* seem to reinforce each other in the verbal forms “ideeshih dassan” or “dassan ideeshih”. Quite interestingly, the intransitive form of the verb “ideeshih” also refers to the action of becoming thicker, or “letting to infuse” when we speak about tea. For example, we can speak of a tea of bad quality when it does not infuse well: “tsai sain ideeshihgüi bain”. So if the verb *dasah*, according to Legrain, refers to a reciprocal harmonizing process, rather than rendering internal an external reality, the use of the verb *ideeshih* might connote the idea of a reciprocal absorption or impregnation. The ideas of absorption and impregnation might be present in the expression “to be at home” or “to be settled” mobilizing the notion of homeland “ideeshin nutagshih” (Bawden 1997). Nevertheless none of these expressions were present in the old man's discourse.

After losing his herd, he could not stay in the countryside anymore. He moved to the city with his nephew. His wife had passed away a few years ago and he had almost no family left in his province. As he says, he feels unnecessary in the city, he cannot move because he has not enough money. He complains about the pollution of the capital and bitterly regrets the time when he could herd his sheep. If he had enough money, he would go back to the countryside and start again his herder's life. What is the most painful for him is to be dependent on his nephew, who works now in the construction. In the countryside, he taught his nephew to be a good herder and now this is his nephew who does everything for him. In addition, they have settled on a fenced plot of land, *hashaa*, which belongs to one of his relatives. Soon they will have to leave the place because somebody offering more to rent the place will settle there. When I met him, he did not know where he would move. He said it was his destiny, his “huv' zaya”.

The old man was far from being the only one to be in this difficult situation. Tuya, a 46-year old woman who migrated from the Hentii province five years ago with her husband and her two sons because of a *zud* had already moved to three different places in the *ger* district. Most of the time, the soil of the *hashaas* was unstable and when it rained, the water just flowed through

the yurt. She worked as a cleaner in a local supermarket and one of his sons worked as a security guard in the same supermarket. Her husband and her second son drove a truck for a coal company and sold coal to the families of the *ger* district. After having worked five years for the coal company, the husband had saved enough money to buy his own *hashaa*. With the passing of time the relationships between Tuya and her husband had become difficult. Her husband wanted to get divorced and throw her out of the *hashaa*. When I left her, she did not know where she would live in a couple of months. She hoped that a friend of her boss in the supermarket would let her put her *ger* in his *hashaa*. Tuya did not want to go back to the countryside because there was no more life over there and on the other hand her future in the *ger* district remained highly uncertain. She had to move again.

In another area of the *ger* district, a 51-year old man named Orgil shared the same feeling of being stuck in-between different places without being able to settle anywhere. He had moved from Övöhangai to Ulaanbaatar in 2009. In Övöhangai, he worked for a company that dug wells when he got a cerebral stroke. After this accident, he could not work anymore for his company and had not worked long enough to live on his pension. He went to live in Ulaanbaatar to try to get a new job. His elder brother, who works in the police of the capital city, helped him to find a *hashaa* near the *narantuul* market, quite in the centre of the city. He found a job as a guardian of a parking in the neighbouring buildings. His wife cleaned the staircases of three buildings nearby. He would like to stay there and work nine more years to have a better pension and pay the fees for his two sons' studies in Ulaanbaatar. Afterwards, he did not know what he would do, he did not appreciate life in the city, it was too polluted and too noisy. He wanted to go back to Övöhangai where all his friends and parents lived. Maybe, if his sons could buy a *hashaa* in Ulaanbaatar, he would live with them.

It is difficult to think that Orgil will have the possibility to live nine more years in this place because according to the new master plan of Ulaanbaatar the entire place will be erased. The surroundings of the *hashaa* he rents have become a wasteland and the only noise he hears all day long is that of the tower cranes. Neither Tuya or Orgil, or even the dozen of new migrants I could meet in the *ger* district used the verb *ideshih* to refer to their relationship to the city.

Picture 11

Neither Tuya or Orgil, or even the dozen of new migrants I could meet in the *ger* district used the verb *ideeshih* to speak about their way of living in the city. All the stories about migration from the countryside to the city are different and none of them is representative of the others. Nevertheless, one recurrent way in which the new migrants referred to the city was through the verb “baraadah”, “bi hotyg baraadaḡ irsen”. This verb has different meanings. It means “to be close to”, “to follow”, “to pursue” or even “to haunt” (Bawden 1997). It infers the idea of a distance a person needs to travel. In the countryside for instance, when one sees a car coming from afar to the encampment, we may use the expression “Bi machiny baraa haraj bain”. The verb also conveys the sense of a place where you are not sure to get into, or to become fully part of. It connotes the idea of a possible separation, or the ephemeral and unstable character of a relationship. This uncertainty was particularly significant for a couple of herders from Övöhangai. They had lost a big part of their herd because of a *zud* and all the family could not live on the herd anymore. They had bought a *hashaa* for their son next to a garbage dump for him to be able to live close to the city (*baraadah*) hoping that he could find a job there. They truly hoped that he would be able to find his marks in the city, *holoo oloh*, literally “to find one’s feet”.

Conclusions

What this article shows is the importance of long duration to get used to a place, *dasah*. New migrants in the city remain attached to the *savdag* of their homeland through the recitation of prayers and the realization of homeland paintings. However, with the passing of time, the names of new *savdag* slowly appear in the women’s daily prayers until they replace the former ones, and the homeland paintings do not refer to their presence in the landscape left behind anymore but rather to personal memories associated with geographical landmarks. Getting used to a place is a very long process. The new migrants who have no access to private property and who moves relentlessly from *hashaas* to *hashaas* might never get used to the city and its periphery. Some of them feel stuck in-between places. They are far from their homeland and do not feel really like being part of the city. They are just living close to it (*baraadah*).

The relationship between a person and his/her homeland conveys the idea of belonging to a place. As Cecegbal mentioned, elders incur the risk of dying quickly if they leave their homeland. They will miss the *savdag* of the place and the *savdag* will miss them as well. The *savdag* do not literally “own” the elders and the elders do not “own” their homeland in a cadastral way. Nevertheless, the idea of belonging to one’s homeland echoes another idea according to which in Mongolia the tie between a person and a particular object is established through constant use. Cecegbal has made daily libations and move from one encampment to another in her homeland all her life. Although the homeland is not a “thing” or an “object” to own, it seems that the relationship between a person and his/her homeland shares some similarities with certain Mongolian ideas on property. According to Humphrey (1999b: 61), tradition-minded Mongols in general prefer old things, well worn, with a patina of use, with a deep, long-lasting, inherent smell. “Rather than buy a new bowl, for example, such a person might prefer one with cracks and sign of mending, (...). For the bowl to become ‘his’ he would have to use it too, (...)”. In a similar way, some persons keep the clothes of relatives who have died, the patina and smell of them reminding them of the loved ones. As if the defunct and his/her cloths had become parts of each other.

With the passing of time, people and certain things seem to constitute each other. For the elders the homeland has become a well-known place, as soft as a cloth worn many times (*dassan gazaryn dawuu zöölön*), like a second skin. Their relationship has thickened according to a process of mutual transformation and absorption, like the water where the tea infuses well (*ideeshih*). Interestingly, the Mongol word for “property” (*höröngö*) conveys the idea of transformation and multiplication. The same word is used for the ferment used to make alcohol, for yeast, for seeds, and more generally for a source of origin. “(...) *xöröngö* in the sense of bacterial ferment should continue for ever, like the family’s hearth (...)” (Humphrey 1999b: 62). Inhabiting the homeland is also belonging to it, becoming a part of it, and vice versa, as the practice of burying the placenta at the birth place indicates. This is what some of the new migrants in the city are unable to do.

Since the beginning of this article, we have travelled a quite long distance in time and space from Cecegbal’s trajectories in his homeland when she was still living a herder’s life, to the new migrants who wants to settle in the city. Whereas Cecegbal’s mobility attached her to her homeland, the relentless move of the new migrants, who do not have access to private property, detach them from the city. I cannot help thinking about an article by Gregory Delaplace on the idea of homeland where he describes the ways in which the herders carefully erase the traces

of their passage after leaving an encampment, such as the circle of the yurt and the hearth on the soil. Such practices give the impression to the western observer of “Inhabiting the land without living anywhere” (my translation, Delaplace 2013: 105-107). This is quite the opposite of what some new migrants in Ulaanbaatar have to face that is “living in the city without inhabiting anywhere”. The transition from one situation to another involves different distances and speeds. What the 65-year old man who cannot get used to the city says “Bi hotod ideeshihgüi bain” seems to tell us is that distances and speeds in Mongolia may also be considered in terms of the thickness and thinness of the relationships people entertain with space and time.

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