‘Tears of Rejoicing Spirits’

Happiness and the Mediation of Human–Spirit Relations in a Mongolian Mountain Sacrifice

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Abstract

Accounts of Mongol mountain sacrifices (*ovoo takhilga*) variously focus on transactional offerings that elicit benefits from local spirits and on the patron-like position held by spirits towards those who supplicate them. In contrast this article explores how, in such ceremonies, human–spirit relations are shaped through the enactment of emotions: in this context, happiness. Bringing classic literature on sacrifice into dialogue with recent studies of happiness as a social phenomenon, we argue that the generation of happiness (*bayarluulakh; bayasgakh*) in local spirits is of great importance in mediating the distance between spirits and their human neighbours. This mediation allows for the shaping of optimal post-sacrificial relations between these two categories of being. Our argument is made through an analysis of ethnographic and linguistic data relating to an *ovoo takhilga* in a Khalkha area of central Mongolia.

Keywords

Buddhism – happiness – Mongolia – pastoralism – sacrifice

1 Introduction

Since the end of state socialism in 1990, religious activity proliferated across Mongolia. This involved the revival of shamanic lineages, reconstruction of Buddhist temples and the introduction of new forms of Christianity. This revival has been marked by the reintroduction of annual sacrifices offered on – and to – sacred mountains (*ovoo takhilga*). Until the suppression of Buddhism during the late 1930s, Buddhist lamas widely practised mountain *takhilga* ceremonies. Between then and the introduction of religious liberties in the early 1990s, such events were banned as non-conducive to fostering the ‘atheistic opinions’ (Sambuu 1961: 10) promoted by the Mongolian People’s Republic.

During mountain *takhilga* ceremonies, Buddhist lamas make offerings to a range of recipients. They may include sacred mountains, the *ovoos*¹ constructed on their summits, gods of the Buddhist pantheon and local spirits.² Given their diversity across the Mongol world, it is difficult to provide a summary of the formalised parts of *takhilga* ceremonies. But they generally include food offerings (*takhilyn idee*), whose content depends on the nature of the recipients and the liturgical traditions of the place of offering. *Takhilga* ceremonies are also accompanied by a verbalised element. This involves the chanting of *sudar* (sacred texts), often, although not exclusively, in Tibetan. While mountains across Mongolia receive regular offerings from householders in the form of libations and prayers, *takhilga* offered by lamas are usually held once every summer.

A large literature on contemporary mountain *takhilga* has been produced since 1990. It variously focuses on ‘cosmopolitical’ practices (Sneath 2014), the formation of local identities (Bayarmaa & Buyandelger 2017; Erdenetuya 2014; Sükhbaatar 2001) and the production of age- and gender-based hierarchies (Pedersen 2011). Pertinent to the subject of this article, much of the literature explicitly attends to how relations between humans and local spirits (*lus savdag*; *gazryn ezed*) are mediated by sacrificial offerings

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- 1 *Ovoos* are typically rock cairns placed at ‘heights, passes and cross-roads’ (Heissig 1980: 103). They house local spirits, and provide places for making offerings. In some areas of western Mongolia, where stones are scarce but forests plentiful, *ovoos* are typically made from wood.
 - 2 In line with conventional Mongolian–English translation practices, we use ‘gods’ to refer to Buddhist divinities (*burkhan*) named in this article, including Jamsran and Namsrai. We use ‘local spirit’ to refer to a category of beings (*savdag*, *lus*, *gazryn ezed*, *uul usny ezed*, and so forth) believed to inhabit the mountains or rivers of particular localities.

(Bernstein 2013: 82ff; Empson 2011: 81ff; Humphrey 2019: 182ff). These spirits have considerable influence and power over human affairs but, within the Buddhist cosmological hierarchy, sit below the level of the gods who are the main recipients of many mountain *takhilga* ceremonies. Nevertheless, they have an important place on such occasions, where they benefit from receiving food sacrifices and hearing *sudar*-chanting.

Drawing on ethnographic and linguistic materials, we examine the mediation of distance between local residents and a female *savdag*³ in the context of a mountain *takhilga* regularly performed in Mongolia's pastoral Saikhan *sum* [district]. This sacrifice manages distinctions between humans and spirits in this region, a relatively prosperous, predominantly Khalkha-populated area of central Mongolia. The ‘distance’ we have in mind is both spatial and ontological in nature. It manifests the fact that local spirits are usually⁴ physically incapable of apprehension by humans, and regarded as categorically distinct types of being. Drawing on a description from the anthropology of religion, such beings ‘are never simply there the way other people are there: they are generally farther away than other people, and, often ... they are not sensorially available in all the ways people are’ (Robbins 2017: 465).

This mediation of distance is important to consider as it has a significant influence on the unfolding of pastoral life once the *takhilga* has finished. Every June, lamas and local male pastoralists in Saikhan *sum* take part in a *takhilga* ceremony on the area's sacred ‘Saikhan mountain’. Amongst other things, this involves the ‘pacification’ (*taivshruulakh*), ‘medication’ (*emchlekh*) and ‘soothing’ (*argadakh*) of a temperamentally ferocious (*dogshin*) *savdag*. This occasion also has the effect of provoking joy (*bayartuulakh* or *bayasgakh*) in this being. On being rendered happy, the usually capricious *savdag* is expected to bring rain on the area, protect livestock from disease and the district from drought and other disasters (cf. Heissig 1980).

In this article, we propose an affect-based approach for examining the mediation of relations between Saikhan's human inhabitants and the local

3 *Savdag* (Tib. *sa bdag*) have been described as ‘masters of the land’ (Tömörtogoo 2018: 218). They are similar to *lus* (see note 4 below).

4 Although invisible to ordinary people, Mongolian commentaries describe *lus* (Tib. *klu*) as ‘legendary beings living in rivers, lakes and the sea; with human heads, and the bodies of snakes’ (Tömörtogoo 2018: 113–14). But the terms *lus* and *savdag* can be difficult to disentangle conceptually, and are frequently joined in the compound phrase (*khorsboo üg*) ‘*lus savdag*’ (see note 9 below).

savdag. We argue that the production of happiness in Saikhan's *savdag* through *takhilga* ceremonies is an important way to mediate distance between this being and the people who depend on her for their livelihoods, thereby affording optimal post-sacrificial relations between these two categories of being. Here, happiness is a sense of joy grounded in relation to peaceful circumstances and participation in collective activity. This sense of happiness goes beyond the temporary enjoyment of felicitous conditions, and relates to a sense of humans and spirits living together in a well-organised cosmos. While the social sciences have long shown the ability of sacrifice to mediate distance between gods and humans in a generic sense (Hubert & Mauss [1899] 1964; Robbins 2017; Willerslev 2013), we examine the particularly important role of sacrificially generated happiness in making spirits receptive to human prayers and invocations. In so doing, we aim to broaden studies of human–spirit relations nurtured through mountain *takhilga* beyond two current paradigms: one focused on the transactional exchange of offerings for favours (Bernstein 2013: 175–6; Chabros 1992: 141), the other on how local spirit masters are under lord-like obligations 'to favour the worshippers in a way that is analogous to patronage' (Sneath 2007: 137).

Several existing studies of Mongol *takhilga* touch on the enaction – or bringing into being – of happiness in spirits (Bawden 1958: 40; Humphrey & Laidlaw 2007: 268). In this respect they echo similar observations made in classic studies of sacrifice (Frazer [1922] 1959: 407; cf. Bataille [1949] 1991). What this article seeks to do, however, is to provide an explicit analysis of how the generation of happiness in Mongolian local spirits provides an unusually intense and productive 'intersubjective and relational' (Walker & Kavedžija 2016: 6) grounding for ongoing human–*savdag* relations. Our argument is developed in relation to the long-held social scientific observation that happiness is a socially situated emotion rather than a mere product of individual psychology (Durkheim 1915: 400; Huizinga [1949] 2002: 197). Recent literature shows how happiness concepts are deeply embedded in wider cultural forms and value systems (Walker & Kavedžija 2016; Robbins 2016). But as a socially grounded emotion, happiness and the possibility of being happy extend beyond the bounds of a purely human sociality to affect the spirits with whom people need to engage. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, 'the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy' ([1922] 1998: 106). During Saikhan's mountain *takhilga*, the *savdag* takes on human qualities (*khünshүүлj үзdeg*) as she is exposed to the joyous physical sensations of hearing *sudar*-chanting and consuming sacrificial foods. By being made happy, we show how this being is rendered amenable to taking care of the material needs of the people who depend on her and ask her for help. At the same time, however, the production

of happiness – something that may be felt as ‘an ephemeral experience rather than a lasting state’ (Vigh 2016: 220) – does not lead to a complete narrowing or effacement of distance between spirits and humans. To do so would collapse the differences that obtain between them to begin with, and therefore underdo the premise for their relation.

Our article is structured across four sections. The first section presents information on the distance that obtains between Saikhan’s *savdag* and her human neighbours in the course of everyday life. It begins with an outline of a local folk-tale (*domog*) explaining the genesis of the *savdag*, before tracing the rules and practices that structure an everyday relationship of distance between these categories of being. The second section presents a detailed analysis of a *takhilga* ceremony on Saikhan mountain. Both authors have, at various times in recent years (2010, 2014), witnessed and studied this event at first hand. We outline its liturgical structure, including the types of food offerings made and the texts utilised. This detailed, descriptive part of the article sets the scene for the remaining two sections. The third section explores how these occasions induce happiness in the *savdag* of the mountain. The fourth and final section traces how this affective influence shapes post-sacrificial relations between the *savdag* and her human neighbours.

2 Living with Distance: Local People and Local Spirits

Like other regions of Mongolia (Bayarmaa & Buyandelger 2017; Erdenetuya 2014; Sükhbaatar 2001), Saikhan *sum* is home to various powers that haunt its forests, rivers, pools and steppelands. But its most famous spirit-inhabitant is the female *savdag* of Saikhan mountain. A popular folk-tale (*domog*) tells the origin story of this being. Various written and spoken versions add in or remove different segments of the story, but the basic structure of the text remains the same across different accounts (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963). Forever set in a feudal-era ‘chronotope’ (Bakhtin 1981) populated by cruel lords and poor hunters, it presents a narrative that links the identity and toponyms of a particular locale with the existence of a particular spirit. A well-known version runs thus:

Long ago, a poor but very beautiful girl (*okhin*) lived with her elderly parents, their household eking out a difficult living hunting marmot (*tarvaga zuram*), deer (*buga göröös*) and other wild animals. One day a camel caravan and large numbers of livestock passed their home on a two-day long migration. When the father came home from the hunt, he discovered his daughter was engaged to a lord (*noyon*) from another *khoshuu*

[administrative district], who owned the caravan that had just passed his yurt. He lamented that his only girl was given to a stranger. But there was nothing anyone could do, and three days later the unwilling bride-to-be was taken in exchange for a cart and milk-cow. That night, the girl asked the lord for permission to go outside and offer a libation to the 'Seven Gods' constellation (*doloon burkhan od*).⁵ When the lord gave an order that his new wife was not to be disturbed, the girl went outside. But she leapt onto a horse untethered from the rest of the lord's mounts, and rode away into the darkness to escape from her new home. Arrested by the lord's officials after a few days' journeying throughout Saikhan *sum*, she was taken back to his encampment. Finally the girl was allowed to go to Saikhan mountain where, after making a *serjim* offering,⁶ she disappeared within its flanks.

The soul of the girl had undergone metamorphosis into the *savdag* of the mountain and has remained lodged there ever since. While some Mongol mountain spirits appear in sacred images (Heissig 1980: 109–10; Humphrey 2019: 183; Sükhbaatar 2001), the *savdag* of Saikhan mountain has no artistic depictions. Nevertheless, she has a physical form, which is beautiful in appearance: her skin shines like the full moon, her red cheeks are the colour of fire and her teeth are like white jade. Like other spirits in the literature (Demchigmaa 2019: 64–5), she is mounted on an animal, in this case a pure white ambling horse (*joroo mor*).

Distance emerges as an important theme within the *domog*, providing a 'structure of explanation' (Ricouer 1983: 95) for how the tale ends. By the time she has been absorbed into the mountain as its ruling spirit, the girl has become distanced from her former life, both in social (by withdrawal from her families by birth and marriage) and ontological (through transforming into a radically different type of being) terms. But spatial-cum-ontological distance between humans and the *savdag* is not restricted to the narrative structure of this popular local folktale. It also underpins how people relate to this being in everyday life. Throughout Saikhan *sum* local householders and other 'ordinary people' (*engiin khümüüs*) make daily offerings of tea and *airag* (fermented mares' milk) to Saikhan mountain and its spirit (cf. Bristley 2015: 45). Accompanied by prayers (*zalbiral*) and regarded as a form of worship (*süseg*), local lamas note how these offerings were the only ones to take place during

5 A constellation corresponding to *Ursa Major* ('The Plough').

6 This ritual involves the offering of alcohol using one's ring finger (*yadam khuruu*). It is variously offered to heaven (*tenger*) and for the peace and tranquility of the world.

the socialist period when mountain *takhilga* were forbidden. As Altanzuu lama, the influential head of one of Saikhan’s Buddhist monasteries explained, ‘people offer tea, milk and *airag* libations to the mountain. They are invisible to the human eye, but their smell and taste feed local spirits [*khanghai delkhii*].’⁷ Other local people may occasionally recite a *zürkhen tarni* (‘heart spell’) to the mountain, chanting ‘*um dari düd dari düri suukhai*’⁸ in order that ‘one’s work may be without obstacles’.

The possibility of these acts taking place bears witness to an inherent distance between the *savdag* and those venerating her (cf. Hubert & Mauss [1899] 1964: 98; Robbins 2017). Even when they are made, though, the distance between humans and the *savdag* still remains significant without the ritual intervention of a lama. Moreover, many local people are wary of how they interact with the *savdag*. This is because mistakes in dealing with her have the potential to incur significant harm. As Saikhan’s lamas explain, local spirits have particular ‘forms’ (*dür törkh*). While some Western concepts of form emphasise ‘qualities determined with reference to substance ... in some appropriate material or other’ (Sellars 1957: 698, emphasis original), the ‘forms’ of Saikhan’s spirits draw together a wider set of attributes including gender and modes of behaviour. The *savdag* of Saikhan mountain is well known to have a temperamentally ferocious (*dogshin*) nature, a generic behavioural quality shared with spirited horses that are difficult to ride, and fierce Buddhist gods who fight the enemies of religion. This quality is shared by many other Mongol spirits: it is unrelated to events in the life of the girl who later became the *savdag* of Saikhan mountain, and to the characteristics of ferocious gods otherwise venerated in the area. In the case of spirits, it manifests in a tendency towards anger, and a potential to cause significant harm to those who offend them.

To avoid the *savdag*’s wrath, prohibitions (*tseer*) adhered to by many local pastoralists forbid certain categories of behaviour on or around the mountain. Many of these rules are similar to those documented elsewhere in Mongolia (High 2017: 61–2), and relate to polluting material discharged from human bodies, and the utilisation of wild animals and trees found on or near Saikhan mountain. They articulate the distance that usually obtains between humans and their powerful neighbour into a set of rules designed to protect herders and their flocks from harm. Thus it is forbidden to cut wood, move stones or

7 The term *khangai delkhii* [literally, ‘mountain-steppe and world’] is used non-literally to refer to local spirits.

8 This *tarni* (Sk. *dhāraṇī*) is also recited to the goddess Green Tara (*Nogoon Dar’ Ekh*) for protection.

pollute water sources with various food types (including meat and milk products). Also banned are pointing towards the mountain, urinating or defecating nearby, and hunting in its immediate vicinity. Perhaps most importantly, however, women are not allowed to climb on the mountain (cf. Erdenetuya 2014: 76). Failure to follow these prohibitions has the potential to make the *savdag* angry (*khilegnene*) and draw down terrible calamities (Erdenetuya 2014: 59). As the well-known saying goes, ‘because *lus*⁹ are blind and eyeless, if they are enraged their anger will last for seven generations [*lus sokhor; nüdgüü uchraas khilegnevel, doloön üyeer n’ khorlodog*]’. It means that the rage of these beings is indiscriminate: lacking a frame of containment that restricts it to particular offenders, it can be discharged towards their relatives, acquaintances or descendants. Whilst local people often strive to avoid causing offence, infractions of human–*savdag* relations have led to problems in recent years, some local herding families claiming that the *savdag* dried up a spring in revenge for slights against it.

3 The Sacrifice on the Mountain

Saikhan *sum*’s annual mountain *takhilga* takes place after the end of the national school year in early June. For Altanzuu lama and his colleagues, it is one of the most important religious events of the year. In local historiographical traditions, the sacrifice has been carried out ‘since the earliest times’ (cf. Bayarmaa & Buyandelger 2017: 45; Heissig 1980). But the form it may have taken remains unclear, and the earliest extant description is contained in a reconstructed 33-sectioned Tibetan language text – the ‘Orders for Carrying Out Sacrifice on Saikhan Mountain’ – originally written in Saikhan during the late nineteenth century (Navaan Güdenbe n.d.).¹⁰ Specifying the form of worship offered on the mountain, these rules were used until the repressions of

9 Aside from being the name of a particular category of spirit, *lus* is used as a metonym for other classes of spiritual beings including *savdag*.

10 ‘The Orders for Carrying Out Sacrifice on Saikhan Mountain’ (Tib. *Sas khang ‘o bo ni tha khe la ka ko rim bzhugs so* – སམ་ཁང་འོ་བོ་ནི་ཐ་ཀེ་ལ་ཀོ་རི་མ་བཞུགས་སོ; Mon. *Saikhan ovoony takhilgyn zereg des orshvoi*) was originally written by *Khamba* Navaan Güdenbe, head and founder of Rashaantyn Khiid. The original text was lost during the persecutions of the 1930s. However, it was reconstructed during the early 1990s, based on oral testimony from lamas who took part in Saikhan’s *ovoo takhilga* before its prohibition. We thank lamas G. Nandinbaatar (Dashchoilon Monastery, Ulaanbaatar) and *Khamba* Sh. Mönkhjargal (Dashchoinkhorlin Monastery, Bulgan City) for bringing it to our attention.

the 1930s and revised and reintroduced as a framework for sacrifice after state socialism collapsed.

The day chosen for the *takhilga* needs to be one when local spirits descend from heaven to their mountain seats (*lusyn buulttai ödör*). On the day appointed for the *takhilga*, Saikhan's lamas ascend the mountain with other (male) organisers¹¹ of the event and start to prepare sacrificial food offerings (*takhilgyn idee*). Unlike other mountain *takhilga* observed in Mongol lands, a live animal is not directly sacrificed as part of the proceedings (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013: 192). Instead the preparations focus on rice, and *balin*: cones of moulded dough covered in decorative butter ornamentation, which are offered as food to spirit beings in various religious contexts. As sun sets on the mountaintop, the lamas finalise their preparations and start offering an all-night sacrifice to ferocious gods of the Buddhist pantheon. The first important god to receive sacrifice is Jamsran Sakhuis (Navaan Güdenbe n.d.: section 8). This war god is regarded as the main local object of worship (*nutgiin gol shüteen*) in Saikhan's liturgical traditions, and his name features throughout the 'Orders for Carrying Out Sacrifice on Saikhan Mountain'. The second (and most important deity) worshipped is Namsrai (Navaan Güdenbe n.d.: section 20; cf. Choimaa *et al.* 2015: 396–7): a god of wealth originally invited to Mongolia from Tibet. Namsrai's main offerings, which require particular preparation, include two water sacrifices (*usan takhil*) to cool his feet and quench his thirst. They also include the offering of a butter lamp (*zul*) to illuminate his presence on the mountain, and magnolia flowers (*zambaga tsetseg*) to fragrance the area. The *balin* presented to him is censed with burning juniper in two forms (*khüj* and *arts*). Namsrai receives offerings 360 times during the night. A third deity is the fierce horse-headed god Damdin-Yansan, who receives offerings to make Saikhan *sum* rich in horses and other livestock (Sürenkhorloo 2010: 19). *Yadam* (Tib. *yi dam*) empowerment texts are recited to this god (cf. Tömörtogoo 2018: 374), as are the *Itgel* (Tib. *skyabs 'gro*) and *Govi Lkha* texts.

As the sun rises over Saikhan mountain the lamas, who are seated in temporary stalls set up near the mountain's main *ovoo*, start chanting the *Bum san* (Tib. *Bum bsangs*) *sudar*. This phase of the ceremony marks a shift from the offering of sacrifice to Buddhist gods towards the offering of sacrificial foods to the *savdag* of the mountain. By this time, groups of local men have started to ascend the mountain to make their own offerings on the *ovoo*. This

11 Saikhan's *ovoo takhilga* is sponsored and organised by *alumni* from the area's school. *Alumni* are organised into cohorts based on school graduation years. Thus the 2019 cohort was sponsored by the 'year of 1989' alumni. Whilst only men may attend the mountain sacrifice, both men and women take part in the festival that follows at the foot of the mountain.

tall structure, formed from a cone of larch branches arranged on a high stone base, is both an offering place and the seat of the mountain *savdag*. No one is allowed to come empty-handed, and lay visitors typically bring *aaruul* (dried curds), *airag* and other milk-based 'white foods' (*tsagaan idee*). Their colour symbolises purity and merit (Bürentögs 1991: 7) as well as pastoral prosperity (Ruhlmann 2019: 183), and these foods are inherently suitable for offering to hierarchically superior beings such as local spirits (cf. Bayarmaa & Buyandelger 2017: 57). Rather than offering their white foods straight away, however, these offerings are first blessed (*adislasan/aravnailsan*) by the lamas. This transforms them into medicinal offerings (*lusyn em*) called *lümen* that will help revive the health of the mountain's *savdag* and other local spirits. As Altanzuu lama explained, they have been 'made powerful through the reciting of *sudar*'. While an important part of the ceremony, it is unusual to perform as it involves the use of rare plants¹² that are difficult to find. Herders' offerings can now be placed on the *savdag's* *ovoo*, as well as on eight smaller ones surrounding it that house minor spirits (*lusyn dagina*).

The final part of the ceremony, which takes place as *sudar* are still being chanted, involves the offering of sacrifice through presenting various types of sheep meat (*makhan idee shüüseer takhikh*). These honorific offerings consist of *khoniny shüüs*: an assemblage of prepared sheep parts – including the head (*tolgoi*), sternum (*övchiüü*) and sacrum (*uuts*) – also used in other important ceremonial contexts. They are provided by lay sponsors of the sacrifice. The colour of these 'red foods' (*ulaan idee*) suggests vitality, providing a chromatic representation of the living flesh of a herd animal killed and dismembered to produce food for divine consumption. But they have to be boiled well prior to the *takhilga*, to prevent any blood spilling and angering the *savdag* (cf. Erdenetuya 2014: 74). Like the white food offerings, they are mostly placed on the main *ovoo*; but before they are, a special substance called *sandag* is sprinkled over them in an act of purification (*tsatsaj ariusgana*). This effectively constitutes them as another form of spirit-medicine, along with other dry offerings (*khuurai idee*) including dried breads (*boov boortsog*) and curds (*aaruul khuruud*). At the end of the *takhilga*, the *uuts* offering will be removed from the *ovoo* and shared out for consumption amongst the assembled crowds

12 According to the *Aliba sang takil jai terigüiten-i adistadlaqu ba tangyaray-tan kiged belge bilge-ten-i ayulaqu-yin jang üile* [Alivaa san takhil zai tergüütüig adistadlakh ba tangaragtan khiiged belge bilegtüniig aguulakhyn zan üil] *sudar*, the following medicinal plants are included in *lusyn em*: *namjil arür* (*Terminalia chebula*); *zad'* (nutmeg); *sügmel* (cardamom); *gegül* (*Commiphora wightii*); *lish* (carnation); *gürgem* (saffron) and *chugan* (bamboo pith). We thank U. Erdenetuya for bringing it to our attention.

of men. Because the meat has been boiled, it is suitable for eating by humans as well (cf. Chabros 1992: 199). The *övchüü* offering is especially significant as a particularly important food category. Near the end of the *takhilga* it is removed from the main *ovoo* to a smaller one nearby, and immolated as part of a ‘sacrificial burning’ (*khyarvas tavikh yos*). Once burned to ashes, the *takhilga* is officially over.

4 Making the Spirit Happy

The mountain *takhilga* in Saikhan *sum*, like others held across Mongolia, is dedicated to medicating (*emchlekh*), soothing (*argadakh*) and calming (*taitga-ruulakh*) the *savdag*. For Altanzuu lama and his colleagues, offering ‘medicine’ in the form of *lümen* is important because various human activities lead to the degradation of their health. As in other parts of Inner Asia where there is a close association between the bodies of spirits and the topography of the land (Pedersen 2011), harm done to the landscape of Saikhan through the pollution of water sources and other means will affect the health of its spirit inhabitants. The *takhilga* also induces changes in the mood of the mountain *savdag*, rendering this temperamentally ferocious being calm and pliable. These processes do not change her fundamentally ferocious character (*dogshin aranshin*); but they do induce a measure of pacification as she hears holy texts chanted by Altanzuu and other Saikhan lamas.

Of relevance to this article, however, the *takhilga* on Saikhan mountain also induces happiness in the *savdag*. As anthropologists note, what counts as happiness is ‘imagined very differently across cultural contexts’ (Walker & Kavedžija 2016: 8). In the literature on Mongol happiness concepts, attention is heavily directed to fortune-summoning *dallaga* rituals (Chabros 1992: 274; Hamayon 2016: 135). Happiness – an existential condition manifested in the wealth of households, including abundance of livestock and plenty in food – is something to be ‘summoned in’ (*dallakh*) and held through ritual means. Examples of these practices range from the simple circulation of grain in one’s hands to harness fortune, to the utilisation of ribbon-decked arrows in more formalised Buddhist rituals (Hamayon 2016: 135). In other contexts, scholarly attention turns to the relation between happiness and luck concepts – *jargal* and *az jargal* – which are manifested in games and some forms of number symbolism (Ruhlmann 2019: 131). Here, happiness takes the form of acquiring benefits through a fortunate situation. Whilst not wholly random in its distribution, such happiness is nevertheless not evenly distributed amongst everyone.

But although *dallaga*-summoning rituals have an important place at the end of the Saikhan *takhilga* ceremony, the happiness inspired in the *savdag* is of a different sort. Described by Altanzuu lama and others using the verbs *bayarlakh* and *bayarluulakh* (the causative form of *bayarlakh*), the happiness engendered in the *savdag* speaks to the inducement or production (*törökh*) of joy (Tsevel 1966: 81). Etymologically related to the term for ‘festival’ (*bayar*), *bayarlakh*/*bayarluulakh* suggest a sense of rejoicing experienced in specifically contextual, rather than existentially defining, ways. It is situated in particular ‘time-spaces’ or event-bound situations, and in many circumstances defined by its relatively short temporal duration when compared with the relatively longer-term implications of *dallaga* rituals.

More specifically, the happiness of the *savdag* is physically felt and evoked through specifically sensorial means. As is the case with spirits and gods in other religious contexts (Hubert & Mauss [1899] 1964; Robbins 2017), *savdags* and other local spirits are phenomenally different from the other beings (humans, livestock) they live alongside. They are mostly invisible, and cannot be heard or sensed in everyday life. Nevertheless, they are capable of bodily sensations. Anthropological studies of bodies focus on how these corporeal forms link ‘the here-and-now of experienceable social space-time and some enveloping and perduring social order’ (Silverstein 2013: 89). For the *savdag* of Saikhan mountain a series of bodily sensations evoked during the *takhilga* link this event with the repeated performance of an important annual ceremony shaping relations between herself and her human neighbours. These sensations are worked on by the lamas during the *takhilga*, in order to make local spirits happy. Altanzuu lama summed up this process when he explained how local lamas seek to make these spirits feel and seem human (*khünshüülj üzdeg*). For this to happen, they ‘have to see, hear, smell, taste and feel – experience the five senses [*tavan medrekhiüi*]’ through which sentient beings are able to situate themselves in relation to the world (cf. Demchigmaa 2019: 60). He went on to add that it is possible for some of these feelings to be accidentally provoked, as when urban holidaymakers in the countryside cook barbecued meat whose smell inadvertently awakens local spirits. But whereas these occasions provoke anger in spirits who can smell food but not eat it, the *takhilga* on Saikhan mountain is deliberately designed to make the *savdag* happy. This is through the offering of sensually delicious substances for consumption and the recitation of holy texts that invoke joy in those who hear them.

Aside from the chanting of *sudar* and offering of foods, the performance of the sacrifice is intimately connected with a wrestling competition. As the sacrificial ceremony is ongoing, four wrestlers perform on the summit of the mountain within view of the *savdag*’s *ovoo* and the lamas’ stalls.

Between the conclusion of the *Bum San sudar* and offering of boiled sheep parts on the mountain *ovoo*, four wrestlers perform for the entertainment of the *savdag*. Their performance precedes the hosting of a larger festival (*ovoony bayar*) at the northwest foot of the mountain later in the day, which is accompanied by horse racing, wrestling and archery competitions. These provide a visible spectacle for the *savdag* and contribute to her enjoyment of the occasion. While the *takhilga* was closed to women and small children, everyone is welcome to attend the festivities on the ground. These last all day long, and provide a joyous atmosphere for those attending them.

5 Consequences of Happiness

The happiness induced in Saikhan's *savdag* is grounded against a broader set of transformations brought about by the mountain *takhilga*. As in other sacrificial contexts, these transformations take place on a large cosmological scale. This is amply demonstrated in the text of the *Chodba*, one of the texts chanted by lamas during the *takhilga*. Although a *sudar*, the cadence of the *Chodba* is like that of a traditional Mongol *urtyn duu* (long-song) and its performance is followed by the consumption of bowls of *airag* held in the hand during the chanting. Following prayers to the three Buddhist masters Tsongkhapa, Gyal tsap and Khas drub,¹³ and to the ferocious gods who have received sacrificial offerings on Saikhan mountain, the sixth and final section of the *Chodba* closes the chanting with the following invocation.

Through the power of offerings to you and this prayer
In whatever lands we dwell
May illness, negativity, poverty and conflict be quelled
And *Dharma* and auspiciousness increase and spread¹⁴

Saikhan's *savdag* occupies a cosmological position below the exalted figures addressed in this text. But she is nevertheless able to grant the wishes (*khüsel*)

13 These three masters, addressed as 'fathers and sons', were respectively the founder of Gelugpa Buddhism, a Buddhist logician and a teacher of *tantra* and *sutra*. They are addressed first in the *Chodba*. The text of the *Chodba* was written by *Khamba* Navaan Güdenbe, author of the rules for Saikhan's *ovoo takhilga*. The original text survived from the time of its authorship, and has been transmitted directly to Saikhan's present-day lamas. We thank *Khamba* T. Batjargal (Yondondarjaalin Monastery, Saikhan *sum*) for bringing it to our attention.

14 We thank Tenpa Tsering Batsang for this translation from the Tibetan.

and prayers (*zalbiral*) made by lamas and laymen at the *takhilga* ceremony. Her predisposition to do so rests on the fact she has been made happy through the various offerings that have come her way. Whilst sometimes a distant and potentially menacing force in the landscape, the *takhilga* makes Saikhan's *savdag* unusually approachable, as well as prone to help those providing for her own happiness. The distance that usually divides her from the people who live near her mountain has been mediated through the *savdag*'s experiencing joy, a quintessentially human emotion amplified through the stimulation of the *savdag*'s physical senses. Her help is invoked in the same areas as those addressed in the *Chodba* text. As Altanzuu's lama colleague Yondon, a lama from Saikhan's *sum* centre, explained:

One can't just ask for individual wishes, for example 'for my family, mother, father and myself'. Instead, one can wish for 'an absence of drought and *zud* in our homeland, province, country, and across the world; for an absence of disease and plague, and for health; that dangers from fire and water may be far away; that we live in peace and tranquillity; that we may have an increase in food and drink, livestock and valuables, and of plenty [*elbeg delbeg*]; and that great merit will come to us.

The granting of these wishes by the rejoicing *savdag* has a double aspect: evils and various forms of harm are kept at bay, whilst more positive conditions are summoned in. Regarding potential harm to the local area, the *savdag* is believed by many locals to keep contagious livestock diseases away from Saikhan's plentiful flocks. She also prevents the spread of bubonic plague (*tarvagan takhal*) that can be carried and spread by marmots. While these diseases are endemic in other parts of the country, they are rare in this area. The *savdag*'s intervention also summons in generally 'good influences' (*sain nölöö* or *ach iveel*) in relation to which people can ideally live peacefully and enjoy the prosperity of their flocks.

Most importantly, perhaps, the rejoicing *savdag* will bring down rain (*boroo khur oruuldag*) once *takhilga* ceremonies are completed (cf. Sükhbaatar 2001: 11). As in other Mongol areas, where 'rain occurring at a certain time to the benefit of a certain place is very often seen not as water drops randomly falling from clouds, but as the "provision of rain" for a given place/subject/ego' (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013: 151), the falling of rain after the *takhilga* is seen by many as the direct outcome of this event. Moreover, it is intimately related to the *savdag*'s emotional state of mind at this time. As the saying goes, rain is made from 'the tears of rejoicing spirits [*bayarlasan lusyn nulims*]'. In Saikhan it is a phenomenal manifestation of the joy experienced by a temperamentally

ferocious being, which in her happiness blesses the land with plentiful water. The ability of human-instigated ceremonies to bring rain has a long history in Mongolia.¹⁵ But in the context of today’s Saikhan *sum* it is particularly important, given the pastoral context of the area. Like much of rural Mongolia, Saikhan *sum* is dependent on pastoralism as a subsistence economic activity. Livestock raised and sold through a ‘domestic mode of production’ (Sahlins 1974), alongside animal products including cashmere and wool, provide a material basis for the ongoing production and reproduction of local social life. Rain underpins the existence of this life, and weather conditions (*tsag uuryin nökhtsöl*) and grasses and plants (*övs urgamlyn nööts*) watered by rain are critical factors in sustaining it. For this reason, herders often wish for rain to fall throughout spring and summer. ‘Rain’ has positive connotations and values in a range of contexts including songs, poetry, and folk-sayings: ‘a fortunate man comes during the rain, an unfortunate one comes in the wind [*khuv’tai khün khur борооноор, khuv’güi khün khui салхинаар*]’ (Erdene-Ochir 2018: 66). By ensuring a plentiful supply of rain after the completion of Saikhan’s mountain *takhilga*, the *savdag* of the mountain allows human pastoral life to prosper.

6 Conclusion

In their famous monograph on sacrifice, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss ([1899] 1964: 98) reflected on how ‘the profane only draws nearer [the sacred] by remaining at a distance from it’. This article has explored the mediation of distance between humans and spirits in Mongolia through a study of a mountain *takhilga* offered in a rural area. We have shown how the offering of sacrifice serves to induce happiness in a powerful local spirit; that this induction of happiness mediates the distance that normally obtains between this temperamentally ferocious being and her human neighbours; and that this process allows for the shaping of optimal post-sacrificial relations between humans and the local *savdag*.

Studies of Mongol *takhilga* ceremonies have been extensively based around an exchange paradigm. Offerings have been treated as ‘gifts’ (Bernstein 2013: 175) or portions of valuables (Empson 2014), in exchange for which people can expect to receive returns of various kinds. These range from influence

15 An episode in the thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols* records the summoning of rain using *zadyn chuluu* [magical stones] to alter the course of a battle (Onon [2001] 2005: 120, section 143). This intervention resonates with historical and ethnographic descriptions of rain-summoning rituals found in Turkic areas (Molnár 1994).

over the weather to abundance in livestock. Like other studies of sacrifice, these accounts are animated by a transactional focus in which one thing is ultimately provided in order to receive something else. Other studies, in contrast, have focused on the historical-cum-political context of *ovoo* ceremonies and the expectation that local spirits – as lords of the earth – are expected to show patronage to those venerating them and asking for their assistance (Sneath 2007).

Such accounts brilliantly illuminate different aspects of Mongol *ovoo* ceremonies. But rather than use these paradigms to shape our analysis, we have focused on the enactment of emotion-based relations between these categories of being. The imperative for doing so is that the production of happiness in spirits – at least in the mountain *takhilga* offered in Saikhan *sum* – is an important, yet relatively under-studied part of such ceremonies. Happiness, as recent studies show, is inherently intersubjective and social (Walker & Kavedžija 2016). Attending to how it is produced, and the results of its effects, provides important insight into how it affects human-spirit relations. We have shown how, by being made happy, the *savdag* is able to grant the prayers and wishes of people who otherwise try to avoid offending her. As such, it shapes optimal relations between these two categories of being who inhabit Saikhan's fertile pasturelands.

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