Transgressing National ‘Green Culture’ and the Moral Authority of Nature in ‘Age of the Market’ Mongolia

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of nature (*baigal*) and the natural world (*baigal delkhii*, *baigal khangai*) as cosmological ‘beyond’ (*tsaana*) that derives particular moral authority in contemporary Mongolia. Interlocutors detailed an agentive nature, able to punish and save, cause illness and restore health that has become increasingly fierce (*dogshin*) and distant from humans in recent years. This trend was narratively linked to increased disorderly and ‘uncultured’ actions that disrupt the balance between humans and the natural environment which Mongolians’ ‘nature culture’ (*baigaliin soyol*) notionally upholds. Although notions of natural and nomadic culture were transformed during the twentieth century from concepts associated with ‘backwardness’ to celebration of unique forms of heritage, culture’s fundamental tie to nature endured. As ideas of nature uphold social order and ‘stand in’ for order itself, *baigal* normatively governs, reacting to lack of moral guidance and state-led regulation today.

Keywords

social disorder and the body – secular meta-causality – political ecology – dark anthropology – nature’s normativity – naturalised order – cosmology and sacred landscape – postsocialist political economy

During my fieldwork exploring health-related practices and strategies in and around Ulaanbaatar, conversations with practitioners, patients and clients

as well as ordinary citizens often moved into morally inflected, meta-causal realms. Interlocutors causally linked increased incidence in non-communicable diseases and medical conditions to political economy. With rates of alcoholism increased 40-fold in the past 30 years, and anxiety 10-fold over the same period, Mongolians today are experiencing a 'crisis of psychology' (*setgel züin khyamral*), as Khongorzul, a principal clinical and research psychiatrist at the National Centre for Mental Health, recounted in our 2015 interview. She told me that 'today there is no one without a loan. Behind that loan, everyone worries.' People I spoke with also detailed the ways in which health has been negatively impacted by the shift from centrally planned to market economy, changed labour relations and perceived competition between one another that living in such a society entails. One interlocutor described onset of a whole host of health issues that started to appear in the early 2000s – kidney disease, insomnia, pain in arms, legs and back – 'because in the age of the market I was working non-stop (*zogsoltgüi*).'

While some held *kapitalizm* responsible for (dis-)ordering the body, the natural world was among the most often implicated meta-causal reason for illness. Many considered nature's movements and fluctuations evidence of its alive-ness: from shifting sand dunes to statues buried during the state socialist era that moved underground because the earth itself moves, to changing patterns of rivers and 'eternal' snow caps that shift in shape and size, year in and year out. Complicit in this alive-ness was agency, as interlocutors described nature as a kind of actor with an agenda that lies just outside the scope of lay people's knowledge. Such a nature is able to punish and save, cause and alleviate illness. I often heard reports of damaged and destabilised landscapes that wreak havoc on the human body. 'In the valleys, rivers and mountains bad entities are running', a 'folk' healer (*domch*) told me. Calamity strikes (*gai dairakh*) he said, as incensed spiritual constituents of landscape chase after the offender to deliver punishment. At the time, this healer was describing to me the increased incidence of spiritual poisoning in recent years for which the hedgehog needles and oil that he prepares in his Ulaanbaatar home are especially efficacious in treating. Many such healers like him perceive their treatments as re-ordering the body.

Whereas regional literature tends to focus on the natural environment and its cosmological constituents in religious discourses (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019; High 2013) or the interrelation and irreducibility of such cosmological forms with the political economic (High 2017; Pedersen 2011), my aim in this article is slightly different. I suggest that ideas of nature in public culture are important to trace, not least because they provide insight into the socio-historic ways in which social order is upheld (Williams 1980). Daston and Vidal

(2004: 1) remind us that, in a great many cultural and historical contexts, the concept of nature is often used to consider standards of the morally right, the good and the valuable. However, what is considered natural is far from static and self-evident, and authoritative voices from theologians to physicians, philosophers to scientists, tend to shape hegemonic conceptions of 'natural' and 'unnatural'. Despite its obstinate authority, 'nature's necessity' has been linked to some of the most malleable of cultural constructs.¹ Nature's authority, Daston and Vidal say, can also stand for order as in, for example (2004: 14):

the division of labor among insects and humans, the great circle of the constellations and seasons, the fixity of types, the balanced give-and-take of exchange, the conservation of energy ... the immanent justice of cause and effect. Within the framework of nature's moral authority, even the disorder wrought by earthquakes and floods becomes part of a scheme of vengeance for human malfeasance. Whether this order is perceived as harmonious or oppressive, ineluctable or changeable, just or unjust, it is oddly insidious.

Such insidiousness is due, in part, to the fact that the natural is often portrayed as synonymous with the self-evident, blending habit – the 'is' – and duty – the 'ought' (Daston & Vidal 2004: 14). Nature's order then seems to render autonomy and obedience compatible.

While nature's order upholds 'the morally right' and 'the good' in public discourse, (re-)orderings of nature – in both material and conceptual ways – render it a powerful place to enact political agendas. In Mongolia, the state socialist period witnessed nature ideologically and physically ordered in dual utilitarian and Romanticist ways that portrayed it as a benevolent nurturer harnessed by the state for societal transformation (Turk 2018), similar to modernist transformations of a 'wild', yet masterable nature 'primed to heal' in Russia (Geisler 2014). During the Soviet era, spending time in nature was considered a 'cultured', wholesome and healthful way to use one's free time, resonating with the ways in which nature tourism was promoted across the Soviet Union more generally (Koenker 2013). Many a picnic was enjoyed and poem written by the banks of the Tuul river, then a natural haven a short distance from the bustling capital city. Six national sanatoria and countless others used for collective and state farm usage sprang up around the country where workers could 'mend the human motor' (Koenker 2013: 12). Children were encouraged to attend summer

¹ As in, for example, sexuality debates surrounding the 'unnaturalness' of same-sex eroticism, or the naturalised, biological qualities associated with gender and the host of naturalised social roles and responsibilities that entailed.

camps in nature, learning the skills necessary to become moral and productive members of Soviet society.

Today, the legacy of Soviet-era romanticised conceptions of nature articulate with transformed environmental relations; privatisation of land in the 1990s has meant that the number of mines and scale of mineral extraction has mushroomed in recent decades. Some Mongolians perceive disorderly conduct around sacred places such as mineral springs, while offerings of milk and scarves (*khadag*) from non-local devotees translate as pollution to local residents (see Turk 2018: 225–6).

In discussion with Mongolians from a wide range of demographic and professional backgrounds, a prevalent narrative of increasing distance from the natural world (*baigal delkhii*, *baigal khangai*) emerged. The proximity that Mongolians used to have, but are losing, is reminiscent of nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of Mongolians as a product of their natural environment, and fundamentally shamanic, that, by the turn of this century, notionally crystallised into Mongolians as inheritors of an environmentally friendly 'nomadic civilisation'. Mongolians' distance from nature was complicit in objections to experiences of living in today's society, described as disorderly ordered. For interlocutors, invoking nature was a powerful way to articulate and link bodily and social disorder in moral registers. Offences against nature were framed as cultural transgressions – that is, transgressions against what interlocutors described as Mongolians' 'nature culture' (*baigaliin soyol*). As 'the way things are', not only is nature's moral authority particularly challenging to dispute, it is narratively called on to do normative disciplining, as life experiences for many do not line up with their expectations, or 'the way things should be'.

Articulated here is a different relationship between nature and culture than is seen in nature – culture debates. My argument is rather unlike recent trends to situate mono- and multi-natured cultures ontologically,² or claim radical alterity by way of ontology. In considering what ideas of nature tell us about normative ideology and power relations, my approach resists an ontological/interpretivist split along first-order/second-order lines. Rather, processes of mediation and materiality are co-constitutive (Appadurai 2015: 224–5; Sneath

2 Here I am referencing Viveiros de Castro's (1998) assertion that Amazonian multi-naturalism differs from Western mono-naturalism, and Descola's (2013) elaboration on such constructs, placing various societies into one of four categories (animism, naturalism, totemism, analogism) along axes of naturalism (mono- or multi-) and culturalism (mono- or multi-). Descola (2013: 92) decides to use naturalism and culturalism by analysis of 'schemas' or 'deeply internalized ... cognitive and corporeal templates that govern the expression of an ethos' as well as ways certain cultures identify and relate to aspects of their world. This allows him to set up two categories (interiority and physicality) that can either be multiple or singular.

& Turk in press). In contemporary Mongolia, cosmological constituents of nature are understood in divergent ways, reminiscent of the substantial amount of lost ritual knowledge during the state socialist era (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2013; Højer 2009; Swancutt 2012). Some relate to a Buddhist lama or deity as a particular mountain, while others living in Ulaanbaatar bring to the mind's eye a forested or steppe landscape. Some perceive a mermaid-type creature or gnome-like fairy in natural settings. Others – probably a great many – do not spend much time thinking about such beings, some of whom, in certain contexts, might deny their existence altogether. And while the natural world and cosmological constituents of it are historically situated and imagined in individualised ways, they are also *materially* recruited into human life; masters of deserted, rural homelands block monetary success and cause life-threatening diseases, thereby demanding the proper respect of those who abandoned them. Angered by improper contact, spirits associated with earth and water (*lus, lus savdag*) deposit poison in people's bodies. Guided by a particular cosmological outlook or ideology, people engage in material, embodied processes of mediating the other-than-human (Appadurai 2015: 233–4).

1 The Order of *Baigal*

During fieldwork primarily between 2014 and 2016, interlocutors often described *baigal* as sentient, omnipotent and supremely more intelligent and powerful than humans, at the best of times benevolently guiding and providing for humans. Try as humans might, we can imitate nature but never replicate it. This irreproducibility provided an important source of wonderment at the 'Magic Bee' (*Shidet Zögi*) apitherapy centre in Ulaanbaatar (Figure 1). Bee-venom therapy (Figure 2), the cornerstone of treatment practised there, in complexity is able to surpass synthetic drugs and their administration: 'People think they are wise, but they will never surpass nature. We cannot reach our nature. We continue to research,'³ the centre's founding physician and practitioner of apitherapy told me. Her adult daughter, also a practitioner at the centre, added in English:

People think they are smart, but until now we have never been able to overcome nature. The treatment itself is around 10,000 years old. European medicine has injections of five millimetres, 100 millimetres.

3 khün ooriigoo ukhantai gej boddog. Gekhdee khezee ch baigaliin urd garaagui. Bid nar baigalaa sudalj chadahgui baina. Sudaljil baina.

FIGURE 1 'Magic Bee' centre
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

But bee stings are 1.13 mm. It is so small. It has the effect of ten to forty different types of medications. [Nature] itself is very complex and smart.

Interlocutors described a nature that organises itself to heal humans. *Baigal* provides medicinal plants needed in advance of illness, alerting practitioners like the *otoch* Bayaraa to the kinds of conditions he should expect to see in the upcoming year. 'God or nature didn't give [lit. 'fate'] us extraneous things,'⁴ he told me, as we sat together in the one-room cinder-block building adjacent

4 Burkhan gedeg yum uu, baigal gedeg yum uu bidend ilüü yum zayagaagui yum.

FIGURE 2 Therapeutic bees at *Shidit Zögi*
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

to his home in Mörön. *Baigal* also provides mineral spring water (*arshaan*), a medicinal tool for both city and countryside dwellers, and regulates its fluctuating temperatures and flow in accordance with human need. This was readily apparent at Zaisan's mineral spring on the south banks of the Tuul river (Figure 3). The elderly man who protected this mineral spring from destruction by an asphalt road construction company explained that in the winter it warmly slides down the throat, and in summer it is cold and refreshing, arranging its temperature according to human need. During the first three of the winter 'nine nines'⁵ the mineral spring stops flowing. At the onset of summer, it begins flowing again. Essentially the mineral spring organises itself to flow every year from the summer festival (*Naadam*) to the lunar new year festival (*Tsagaan sar*), two of the country's central holidays.

5 The nine nines of winter are a series of 81 days that are counted in sets of nine. Each nine is associated with a form of temperature measurement. For instance, during the second set of nine days, vodka is said to freeze in outdoor temperatures, while during the sixth set of nine days, roads become visible through snow (Bayarsaikhan 2016). They typically begin around the winter solstice.

FIGURE 3 Zaisan mineral spring
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

Although not privy to all of its wisdom, human have adopted ways to learn from nature. They can observe the animal kingdom, a point of access to transcendent knowledge only available to humans through close observation. Mongolkhaan, a Kazakh fortune-teller, described to me how humans can read signs and patterns in nature: 'The most sensitive animals are ants. If you observe them in the morning and the ants just stay in the nest, it means tomorrow will be cold, maybe it will rain. If the ants are spread out, it means tomorrow will be warm and nice.' This relationship is well highlighted in the origin story of Khujirt mineral spring sanatorium in Övörkhangai province. A dermatologist working at Khujirt told the story to me:

A very long time ago there was an old man named Shunkhlai. He was a hunter, and lived near the *arshaan*. There weren't any families or [domesticated] animals; it was a wild place, and beautiful. One day, Shunkhlai was going to hunt and saw one stag (*buga*) sitting, not moving at all. So Shunkhlai was watching that stag, about to shoot him, but he still wasn't moving. He thought, 'why won't this stag move?' It stood up, drank water and limped along. For some days he watched that stag. He kept observing, and finally it became better and galloped away. The stag's leg was injured and it was ill, and Shunkhlai's leg was also hurting. He thought, 'let me try

the place where that stag was sitting.' So he visited. 'That stag had a leg illness and healed it, so I will also wash (*shavshikh*) my leg by this water'. Also from this water originates fog and steam. From there, he applied mud and kept washing with *arshaan*. He kept going like this and his leg got better. So he spread [the news] to the people: 'There is good water here. It is really great!'

Many of the approximately 14,000 people that undergo treatment each year at Khujirt revere and express their gratitude to Shunkhlai by praying to the mountain adjacent to the facility, which bears his name. They leave offerings near the base or at the cairn (*ovoo*) at its summit, a popular choice being the crutches they came with and no longer need post-treatment.

In conversation with interlocutors, this tendency to observe nature's patterns was juxtaposed with human disorderly behaviour today. Mongolkhaan often spoke to me about the lessons human could learn from nature if only we had different [read: better] values. Here are excerpts from two such occasions:

In the world, among the flying animals, the bee is the most friendly. They live in one hole together with several thousand others. Among the earth's animals, the ant is the most friendly. When I observe ants, every ant carries a leaf. They use the same road, like soldiers. If you observe, when one ant dies, the rest come to get him and bring him back. I have observed this. They are the smartest animals. If it were people, they would never do that. They would say, 'I am tired, you go'. They would all say different things and start fighting. [...] People are now destroying the world. Under the ocean people are doing things that wild animals would never do.⁶

Animals know nature. They know when it will rain. Anything that will happen they know more than people. They are smart. The most stupid, the biggest enemy is human. For example, people eat this or that and they drink vodka. But animals will never do that. They eat grass or, if not, they eat meat. Nature did that, didn't it? For example, people, what are they doing? Marmots dig [holes] and live there without any poison. But people dig by tractor, take the gold and things, committing the biggest

6 Delkhideer nisdeg amitan dotor khamgiin evtei bol zugii. Nig nuhin dotor heden 1,000aaraa amidardag. Gazariin amitan dotor bol shorgoolj. Shorgoolj harj baikhad neg eng navj ureed neg zamaraa yavdag, tsereg shig khamgiin ukhantai amitan. khün bol tegehgui, 'bi yadaj baina. chi yav' engeed tigeech khilne. [...] Delkhiig süitgij baigaa ni khün. Tengis dalai dooguur yum khiij baina, aratan amitan bol khiikhgui.

sins ... Ulaanbaatar became polluted, didn't it? Animals don't make air pollution. Do you see?⁷

According to this narrative, characteristics of recent 'modernizing' trends such as urbanisation, mineral extraction and tendencies to 'commit the biggest sins' keep humans at a distance from nature. Part of it, yet partly estranged from it, humans remain on the outside of a pristine natural world, looking in on a relationship with it we ourselves have damaged. Although people are connected to nature, they underappreciate this fact, or in Mongolkhaan's words, 'don't know about this':

Today's people know nothing about our connection to the sun and moon. They never pay attention to this. The sun rises, how nice is it? The electricity turns off, how agitated people's heart-minds (*setgel*) become, isn't it true? This is just related to nature (*baigal*), isn't it? If the sun rises, if the moon rises, a person's heart-mind becomes peaceful, doesn't it?⁸

Throughout fieldwork, people described a receding nature: forests that no longer bear fruit or nuts, snowlines that recede on mountain tops and mineral springs that dwindle or cease to flow altogether. For instance, Manzshir mineral spring in Töv province completely withdrew its water a few years ago in response to human misbehaviour (Figure 4). There, it was not the persecution of 1000 Buddhist lamas living in the adjacent monastery in 1937 (Figure 5) that offended the mineral spring – that is, not misdeeds from the state – but those of ordinary Mongolian citizens, dirtying the spring's pristine waters with unclean ladles and taking the water from the source, not lower down. Even though lamas have come to appease and beg for water, it has not yet re-emerged. 'The natural world itself knows, the man responsible for protecting

7 Mal amitan baigaliig medej baigaa. Ter boroo orkhiig medej baina. Yamar neg yum bolkhiig khünees ilüü amitan sain meddeg ukhaantai amitan. Khamgiin teneg hamgiin tom daisan gedeg chini khün. Odoo jeshelvel khün eniig idlee, teriig idlee eniig uulaa, deerees ni arhi uulaa. Kharin amitan bol tekhgui. Neg bol övs idne, ugui bol makh idne. Teriig baigalaas khiisen baihgui yu. Odoo jeshee ni manaikhan yaj baina ve? Tarvaga gazar ukhaad amidarj baina. yamar ch khor baihgui. Kharin khümüüs traktoraar ukhaad, alt maltiig avchihaad khamgiin nugal khiij baigaa. Odoo ene nisej baigaa khümüüs khamgiin gai. Ulaanbaatart utaa bolson ni baihgui yu. Amitan utaa garakhgui shüü dee. Kharj baigaa biz?

8 Odoogiin khümüüs nar sartai kholbootoigoo medekh ch ügüi. Tooh ch ügüi. Odoo yu ve gekhed, nar garch baina, khechneen saikhan baina odoo ingeed genel tasarlaa, kharankhui bolhod khün yaj ikh buhimddag bilee. Nar garahgui suudertei uultei baihad hünii setgel yamar ih taivan bish bilee. Yeröösöö baigaltai kholbootoi baihgui yu. Nar garah yum bol, sar garah yum bol khünii setgel taivan baihgui yu?

FIGURE 4 Manzshir mineral spring origin
IMAGE: AUTHOR

FIGURE 5 Ruins of Manzshir monastery
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

the area told me, acknowledging not only nature's agency, but its partial independence from the desires and actions of humans.

2 Nature Proximity: From Nomadic Civilisation to 'Green Culture'

The narrative of Mongolians' lost proximity to nature relates to (re-)framings of Mongolian culture as fundamentally yoked to the natural world. 'Never have we seen a tribe whose life-history was so completely fashioned by the environment', Douglas Carruthers of the Royal Geographical Society wrote of the Uriankhai during his 1910–11 Siberian travels. 'From time immemorial a race of hunters, possessing the inherent traits of a wandering people dependent solely upon nature, they exist as a type most fitted to survive under the particular physical conditions in which they live' (Carruthers 1914: 127). He goes on to note, 'a people who are absolutely dependent upon nature for all their wants naturally worship the hand that gives so freely, and thus we see that pure Nature-worship still keeps a strong hold on the minds of the people' (1914: 245).

Social scientific thought and fascination with the primitive from the late nineteenth century theorised notional stages of human progress on a global

scale. Forms of religion, economic and political organisation and so forth were thought to indicate the level of a society's 'development'. According to evolutionist theories, Atwood (1996: 113) notes, 'shamanism could be explained as an independent growth formed out of the contact of a childlike people, the Mongols, with natural forces they could not fully understand ... a universal stage of religion that any nomadic people must adopt naturally.' Shamanism formed a central pillar in constructing the Mongol's uniquely 'nomadic civilisation'; in keeping with shifts in academic scholarship in the late twentieth century, scholars such as O. Purev (2002) re-cast shamanism as civilised, sophisticated and *original* Mongolian religion (Bumochir 2014). As an imagined historical category that emerged in the mid 1970s, 'nomadic civilisation' was endorsed for the shifting connotations of uncultured and primitive to cultured that the new framing entailed (Tsetsentsolmon 2014). The concept of culture (*soyol*) underwent significant changes during this time as well, from the purging of 'backwards' cultural forms to their re-formulation as cultural heritage of national intellectuals. Circulated by national elites, party ideologues and UNESCO, 'nomadic civilisation' and concomitant heritage discourse by the 1990s became a way to celebrate unique cultural forms on an international stage (Tsetsentsolmon 2014: 432).

This trend to highlight and celebrate distinctive features of Mongolian national culture dialogues with transnational environmentalist discourses today. Compared to its agrarian counterparts, Mongolian 'nomadic' culture has been (re-)cast as 'ecological culture', notionally considered better for the environment during a time of increasing planetary fragility (Zhang *et al.* 2007). The director of a large mine I call Zanar referenced Mongolia's 'green culture' in our interview, as he compared the country with other environmentally conscious countries: 'Recently people have been talking about green countries, green cities.' But because Mongolian culture is nomadic (*nüüdelchin soyol*), he continued, the 'foundational culture is nature's culture (*baigaliin soyol*). Nomadic culture is green culture (*green soyol*).'

Mongolia's 'green culture' is particularly popular in discourses aimed at transnational audiences as, for instance, circulated by state-sponsored and privately owned tourism organisations. Lonely Planet (2017) suggests that Mongolia's 'nomadic culture' allows travellers to 'simply "get back to nature"' and 'it's this true wilderness experience that many people find so appealing'. The Ministry of Environment, Green Development and Tourism (2017) suggests that staying in a *ger* [yurt], central to the country's 'historically and constitutionally nomadic culture', offers tourists an authentic Mongolian experience; one can experience for oneself the same proximity to nature as that of

a rural Mongol: 'Living in a *ger*, the nomadic traditional dwelling, will give you a special connection to nature. The sky and the sun will be right above you through the *toono* [roof ring] and you'll hear the wind, the birds, the herds of your surroundings while staying in your *ger*.' Central to such narratives is the implicit connection that Mongolians are said to have with nature. By living in the 'traditional' Mongolian way, a traveler to rural parts of the country can experience that connection to nature directly.

3 Transgressing *Baigal* and Secular Meta-Causality in the 'Age of the Market'

As discussed above, interlocutors described nature as ordered in a particular way; it anticipates human illness and provides the right medicinal plants, regulates the temperature and flow of mineral springs to suit human needs. While humans can try to emulate nature's order, we can never replicate it. What is more, because of human actions – especially recently – the narrative goes, nature continues to pull away.

Narratives of distance from nature often entailed discontent with the moral content of people today. Especially for ritual specialists, this typically involved deities and 'spiritual' constituents of the natural world (*lus savdag*, *gazriin ezen*). A Darkhad shamanness named B egch explained to me that:

When people are born they have a connection with nature. People right now are polluting nature. They are digging. They wash their clothes in the river. There is no balance between nature and humans. If I am sitting at home and someone starts to dig inside my fence (*khashaa*), I will get angry. It is the same with land and mountain owners.

One of B egch's disciples brings the master (*ezen*) of the Tuul river, Queen (*Khatan*) Tuul, to her body. When embodied, she sobs, lamenting the diminished size of her once mighty waters and the pollution occurring there, especially near the energy plants to the west of central Ulaanbaatar. I asked B egch what happens if humans continue to mistreat the Tuul river. 'She [Khatan Tuul] left us. It is sad. She threw us away.'

Even rural dwellers are not as close to nature as they once were, this narrative of distance and disappointment continues, herding by motorcycle instead of horseback. The director of Zanar mine, founded in the late 1970s, reflected on the near-irreversibility of industrialisation and urbanisation in Mongolia's

recent history: 'People in [Zanar mine's town] ... [If] I said to them, "You need to herd livestock". If I gave them sheep, they cannot [herd them]. They would just ask for a salaried position [in the factory], wouldn't they? They just got used to working in a factory over the 30 years or so.'⁹ For Mongolians today, there is no return to their rural origins, no re-forging the bond with nature they are said once to have had. Such narratives promote the idea of contemporary Mongolians as 'fallen from the grace' of nature, scorned and rejected by Queen Tuul, unable to re-claim the connection to nature that they once had. Much of this disappointment, it seems, is related to the disruption of the pastoral image people have of themselves.

The informal 'code' between humans and nature was sometimes literally spelled out and mobilised to ensure orderly human action, as seen posted near the spring's source at Naranbumbat mineral spring in Khövsgöl province (Figure 6):

Warning for *arshaan* users: Do not throw trash around the *arshaan*'s origin and cairn. Do not allow children to move the *arshaan*'s stones. Let's keep the area clean and 'be touched by' our *arshaan*! Our duty is to love and protect our beautiful nature (*baigal khangai*). If we don't protect our nature, it will tie a very ferocious punishment to us. Please pay attention. Thank you.

I often heard about nature punishing wrongful action by inflicting harm on the person or family members by way of illness, misfortune, financial trouble, marital strife, accident, alcohol dependency, and so on. At times, retribution was nearly instantaneously given, as when the spirit master of the well-known 'Mother Tree' (*Eej Mod*) in Selenge province chased after a microbus and flipped it over because its passengers had left without correctly worshipping there. At other times, punishment might occur years later, in a seemingly unrelated way, even for a transgression a person him or herself did not commit but rather, a family member did. Ritual specialists typically diagnose such events in hindsight, seen as punishment from nature or 'poisoning' from *lus*, *savdag*, or masters (*ezed*) of mountains, rivers or the earth.

A few different healers spoke to me specifically about mining-related illnesses. 'We ourselves keep destroying everything', to include not only the environment but ourselves, Galaa, a shaman and national intuition contest winner

9 [Zanar]-iin khümüüsiig 'za chi mal malla geed khoni ögchihevöl ted nar chadakhgui. Ted nar ajiliin bair khüsdeg baikhgui yu. üildvert ajilaad surchihsan odoo 30 heden jil bolchihloo shüü dee.

FIGURE 6 Sign at Narambumbatiin mineral spring
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

told me. Due to our own actions digging and destroying nature, 'we become poisoned (*khortol boldog*) by the owner of the earth (*gazar shoroonii ezen*)'. I asked him why an entity that typically protects people would poison them? He responded, 'For example, let's think about your home. Someone comes there and makes everything disorderly. You will complain and become angry. With them [the earth's owners], it's exactly the same.'¹⁰ One shaman explained to me that such illnesses are mainly mental, characterised by delusions, excess thoughts and speech and an overactive mind. As the shamanness (*udgan*) Buyankhishig understands mining-related illnesses, the imbalances that mining causes in nature manifest as imbalances in the person's mental state, causing him to 'speak too much and not be able to be understood'. In order to treat this, a ritual that connects him or her with deities of the land and water (*lus savdag*) is needed:

As a result of bad contact with the earth, *lus savdag* has left something bad in the body. A person needs to ask the favour in a soft way ... [they need to] ask *lus savdag* to take back the bad thing. I have seen this in a herder's family, for example. Their herd is dying, there is not enough water. Or lots of arguing in the family, or divorce. All because they have taken or done something they shouldn't have.

Such transgressions against nature were linked to human morality in the narratives of many people with whom I spoke. An elderly practitioner of Buddhist medicine (*otoch*) explained that today's 'age of the market' is marred by human greed, antagonism and loss of respect for nature:

In Mongolia we have one ideology: how can I become rich? With whom do I need to compete? Secondly, people don't love nature. The natural world (*baigal delhii*) gives the punishment: drought, disaster, suffering, sickness: all of these are growing. In this society, a person has taken the shape of the devil.¹¹

He stressed that 'people are in crisis', not just in Mongolia, but globally, citing the 2015 earthquake in Nepal as evidence.

10 Jishee ni tanii ger bailaa gej bodoy. Neg khün ireed tanii geriig ukhaad ongichood yavbal ta ter khünii arasas gomdoj uurlna biz dee. Terentei adilkhan.

11 Mongold bol yaj idej uukh ve khentei daisagnah ve gesen üzel baina. Khoyor dugaart ni baigal delkhiigee khairlakhgui baina. baigal delkhii ergeed khariugaa avch baina: gan, zud, gai zovlon, ovchin ih bolj baina. Ene niigimd khün bold dürstei chötgör bolson.

Such descriptions of depraved human morality and nature's retributive punishment are reminiscent of 'the time of degeneration/calamaties' (*tsoviin tsag*), a Buddhist apocalyptic concept. Borjigin (2006: 46) reminds us that *tsö-viin tsag* has two indicators: the decline in Buddhist faith and deterioration of morality as well as natural disasters, social upheaval, troubles and sufferings. However, rather than decline in Buddhist faith (*per se*) as culprit, interlocutors tended causally to link worsening human character to political economy. Many concernedly described to me the kinds of human characteristics living in a 'hard society' cultivates. I heard of people becoming like the turbulent times in which they live, of 'unstable psychologies' (*togtvorgui setgel züi*), of 'repugnant' (*zevüin*) or 'insufficient' heart-minds (*setgeleer dutsan*), a missing humanness (*khün chanargüi bolson*), and of people who have not become people (*khün boloogüi*). A poet outlined the fundamentally anxious situation living in a market-economic society produces and the avarice it stokes. In today's society, a person with a 'very nice heart-mind' (*ikh saikhan setgel*) is unable to overcome the tough, competitive conditions fundamental to capitalist logics: 'his or her heart-mind falls' (*setgeleer unakh*). But

Who is skilled, who is cunning, who is smart, who is working without sleep? Those people are able to live. [...] One is living in a very hard society so in order to compete, will that person exhibit (*gargakh*) nice thoughts, selfish thoughts, or extremely selfish behaviour? This is market society. For example, I must eat this bowl of food before that person. If I don't eat it, I will die. In order to eat first, I must be skilled. In order to eat first I am able to kill this person. Or he or she will kill me.¹²

Khongorzul, the clinical psychologist from the National Centre for Mental Health mentioned in the introduction, clarified this connection between political economic surroundings and a person's inner state. In February 2015, on one of Mongolia's rare cloudy days, I met with Khongorzul at a coffee shop in central Ulaanbaatar. A middle-aged woman, professional and matter-of-fact in conversation topic and mannerisms, Khongorzul's animated dialogue reflected an enduring commitment to improving the state of mental health care in Mongolia. The overall theme of the interview, the point to which she

12 Khen chadaltai baina, khiin zalitai baina, khiin uhaantai baina, khiin noirgui ajillaj baina, ter hün amidarch bolno. [...] aihtaar khatuu niigemd amidarch baigaa uchraas orsoldo-hiin tuld saihan sanaa gargana, khuvia khicheesen bur dindüü khuvia khiicheesen baidal gargana. Ene bol zakh zeeliin niigem. Jishee ni ene aygatai khooliig bi ene khünees turuulj ideh yostoi. Iekhui bol bi ühne. Turuulj idekhiin tuld bi chadaltai baikh yostoi, bi turuulj idekhiin tuld ene khüniig alj bolno. Esvel ene namaig alna.

repeatedly returned, was the causal link between the drastic increase in mental health illnesses since 1990 and societal factors. In her phrasing, a person's heart-mind (*setgel*) has absorbed (*shingekh*) the unstable situation (*togtvorgüi baidal*) of society and the market economy. Khongorzul explained that the current unstable political-economic situation in Mongolia has influenced the most basic foundation (*ankhnii suuri*) of society: the family (*ger бүл*). In the past, parents prepared their child's *setgel* to live in society; they taught their children how to communicate, share, and support one another: 'A long time ago, the family gave their children enough heart-mind ... Nowadays, within the family, children only think about themselves (*öörügөө боддог*). [They are] very selfish (*amia khicheesen*).' She explained that, because of economic instability in the early to mid 1990s, the family unit started to collapse as parents left their children to work abroad (*Solongos molongos*). 'How can a child's faith (*itgel*) be established without the family?' Khongorzul rhetorically asked me. Divorce rates have risen and continue to do so. Because of this, a child's psychology (*setgel züi*) becomes unstable (*togtvorgüi*). She provided the example of children born and raised during the 1990s, a time marked by scarcity and difficulty: 'They have a very strange character now. They use drugs, suicide, play violent video games. They drink. They smoke. Behind all of this, those children have a missing *setgel* (*setgeleer dutsan*)' (cf. Pedersen & Højer 2008).

Such disordered relations were contrasted against the post-purges state socialist era, described to me as 'very disciplined' (*ikh sakhilagtai*), 'regulated' (*juremtei*) and 'peaceful' (*taivan*). During those times, Mongolians were 'living by distributive systems' (*khuvaarilaltaar*); interlocutors described being given time, numbers and measurements, and of feeling that things generally were guided by regulation and order. This is in marked contrast to today, which was described as disorganised (*zambaraaгүй*), disjointed or disconnected (*khamaagui*), repugnant (*zevüün*), calamitous (*tsöviin*) and turbulent (*bus-gaa*). People spoke to me about situations in Mongolia's 'age of the market' where life's terrain seems difficult to navigate: buses that change route overnight; Kafkaesque bureaucratic hurdles, twists and turns that make little sense and no one to oversee them; that the plans one has made may or may not lead to the desired outcome; that, due to insufficient budgeting from the Ministry of Health, a public hospital has run out of chemotherapy drugs and the family must scramble at the last minute to find the money to buy them from a pharmacy. Implicit in such stories and utterances is a sense that things do not work like they should: a quality of feeling against the grain. It is as if postsocialist terrain has been haphazardly stitched together with no guiding hand in the craftsmanship. No one is looking out for the average person; no one is protecting the environment.

FIGURE 7 Orgoot mineral spring
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

In some cases, lay people took action to protect the natural world from human disorderly relations, situating such disorganisation in terms of lack of state protection. A man who looks after his local mineral spring (*arshaan*) in Övörkhongai couched the need for protective measures in terms of the political economic changes, but referring to the absence of local government: '[Mongolia] transitioned (*shiljekh*) from one society to another. During this time, society's disorderly situation (*zambaraagüi baidal*) has increased, hasn't it? There wasn't anything on the side of protection for our nature (*baigal orchinoo*).'¹³ He requires that when people use the *arshaan*, 'they must be orderly (*emkh tsegtsei*). People can use the mineral spring only without negatively influencing nature.'¹⁴ A woman born near Orgoot *arshaan* in Bayankhongor province moved from her home to live within eye-shot of the mineral spring's origin (Figure 7). She described her decision to me as we sat near the cold pool of water:

13 Neg niigemees nogoo niigem ruu shiljsen. Ene üyed niigemiin emh zambaraagüi baidal ikh болсон байхгүй юу. Baigal orchinoo khamgaalah талаар khiisen yum байхгүй.

14 Khümüüs emh tsegtsei болно. Baigal orchindoo сөрөг нөлөөгуйгеер ene baigaliinhaа yumiiг ashiglana.

In recent years people have understand this mineral spring wrongly. They have used it carelessly. In 2006 this area was littered with trash. Our leaders weren't paying attention to this mineral spring because of the market economy. Many cars come here. In order not to have this mineral spring's origin become dirtied, I put stones around as a fence to protect it. I also put here one or two signs. If people arrive with a tent, I tell them to build it over there. I built two outhouses. Since 2006, only I have watched over this mineral spring and protected it. [...] People probably think that my purpose is to find money. I was only thinking that a very disorderly situation (*ikh zambaraagui baidal*) is occurring here.¹⁵

For interlocutors, meta-causal narratives linked an increase in transgressions against nature with living in 'age of the market' society, the kinds of human characteristics living in such a society cultivates and the lack of governmental protection for the natural environment. This was less about a decline in Buddhist religiosity *per se*, as interlocutors stressed that during the state socialist era – a time of significant loss of Buddhist religiosity and material culture – society was nevertheless more peaceful, pleasant (*saikhan*) and orderly. Interlocutors did not stress the importance of reinstituting Buddhist principles, however defined, to diminish disruptive conduct, but rather, a more present state that would provide regulations, thereby instating ordered relations.

4 Doing What's Right and Naturalised Orders

While some blamed increased incidence of illness, accident and misfortune on nature's punishment, for others, the emphasis was simply on breaking the rules. I spoke to one miner in his early 20s about the trend for mining companies in recent years to hire religious practitioners to appease land spirit masters and associated deities. While there are some workers who read Buddhist mantras and incantations, he explained to me, '[W]hen an accident happens, everyone says it was that person's fault. He didn't follow the mining company's

15 Odoo ene süüliin üyed khümüüs buruugaar oigoj gamgui kheregheed. Odoo 2006 onii üyed khogond daragdlaa, amitan khün zakh zeel geed eniigee ankhaarsangui. Mashin tereg olshirloo teged bi arshaaniikhaa undarga ekhiin deer bokhirduulahgui geed khamgalaad toirüülj chuluun gortig tataad 1, 2 sambar khiigeed. Maikhan savtai khümüüsüig ter deer buulgaad. End 2 noli khiigeed. 2006 onoos khoish yag l ööröö eniigee ezemsheed khamgalaad suuj baina. [...] Ene ulsuud möngö oldog gej bodood baikh shig. Ikh zambaraagui baidal üüseh geed baina.

rules. No one is really talking about spirits of the land (*lus savdag*). Even though the company conducts appeasement rituals for masters and spirits of the land, and even though some workers 'believe' in them, as this man phrased it, accidents in this case were not interpreted as religious transgressions but as against company policy. The director of Zanar mine also phrased protective religious rituals primarily in pragmatic, secular terms. He said that every so often – and especially after an accident – he calls in Buddhist lamas to 'read their books and things' and shamans to perform rituals for the land. Although during the state socialist period such rituals were not performed, as 'Communism is God', in his words:

Now each time the board members have religious rites done, the employees work well, safely, and without accidents. [...] If we didn't do these rituals, people wouldn't pay attention ... Sometimes if there is too much on a person's mind, they forget something, right? That's why we say, 'Hey, we have god. Don't work inattentively. Please try. We need to work safely, right?'¹⁶

Such areligious causal accounts – 'I was injured because I didn't follow safety rules' – are reminiscent of the ways in which nature was ideologically divorced from religion during the state socialist period. A member of parliament detailed the cosmopolitical protection the state provided her father during that time. She explained to me that her father was among the first to plough fields under Khrushchev's Virgin Lands Campaign of the mid 1950s. Her father, his parents and grandparents considered turning the land upside down, killing birds and destroying their nests in the process, an 'unbearable sin'. This was not a religious transgression, she said, as he was 'not a believer'. It was against 'our tradition and culture'. Whenever he felt guilty, he thought 'Okay, I am doing it to feed the people, I am doing it by state order. [...] The state will protect me. Because the state gave me these orders.' The absence of punishment from

16 Ter ni bol use deer üyed shuud tegeed yum khiichihsen odoo bol ter shashiniig ni khiij ögökh tusmaa nogoo ayul osolgui saikhan ajillah baikhgui yu. [...] Odoo teriigee bol tri-age хүмүүс terentei ni oruulahgui bol outargue gantsan odoo yu gedeg yum za chi odoo iim tsaasaar odoo tegeed bai ingeed bai хүмүүс chini ter ni ingeed baingiin yagaad baikhaar ter ni tegeed biochar khonogshood baigaa yum uu, үгүй ч yum uu. Zarimdaa kheterhii ih medeheree yamar ch odoo yugaa aldachihdag tiim ee, sanamjaa aldana, tii? Khaihramjgui bolchihdog tsaana chini chamd burhan bii shүү. Khamaagui oroldov naa-dakhaa khicheegeerei chi bas. Odoo ayulgui ajillakh iim yum baidag, baikhgui yu.

the land, he felt, was evidence that the state spirit (*toriin süld*) had indeed saved him.

That this man's transgression against the natural world was understood as an 'unbearable sin' against 'tradition' and 'culture' shares similarities with the secular framings of nature transgressions today, reminding us of the ways in which 'culture' as concept took on particular associations during the state socialist period that changed over time. Even as the making of the category 'nomadic civilisation' and 'nomadic culture' entailed a shift from negative associations with un(der)-development and the primitive to positive associations as 'green' nature-protectors,¹⁷ the assumed essential proximity to nature has remained.

While the interpretive and etiological frameworks with respect to incidence of illness and accidents offered in this article are diverse – from chaotic social relations and lack of governmental regulations to not following company protocol – they share a central message: the moral value of being orderly and following the rules. But who makes these rules and who enforces them? Who has the power to change them? In the case of mining companies, the answer is comparatively straightforward, while in the case of acting in a 'cultured' (*soyoltoi*) way, it is decidedly less so. While some post signs near mineral springs or live nearby to ensure orderly behaviour, others, such as ritual specialists, give the moral lesson in hindsight, having located the cause for illness in prior action that offended the natural world. The natural – inclusive of the good, morally upstanding and valuable – obscures power relations precisely by naturalising them. The order of nature as 'the way things are' is particularly challenging to dispute, and not only because there is no board of directors to point to as overseer. As a point of contrast from breaking company rules, transgressing the natural world is charged with the added moral weight of firstly, transgressing the nation's 'nature culture'; and secondly, accusations of missing human qualities and insufficient heart-mind (*setgel*): fundamental shifts in human nature.

5 Conclusion

During fieldwork, interlocutors related to a nature that was alive, agentic and supremely more powerful and knowledgeable than humans. Humans can try

17 I have in mind here celebratory portrayals on the transnational stage of recent successful protest and campaigns against mining at Noyol Uul in Selenge province and Oyu Tolgoi in South Gobi province (Austin 2019).

to emulate but will never be able to reach nature's knowledge and ability, the narrative goes. Nature was described as wisely benevolent, ordering itself to meet human need. Partially inside the natural world and partially outside, humans can learn from nature, but we have either forgotten how to do this, or no longer consider it valuable. Nature's orderliness was juxtaposed with human disorderliness: improper respect, digging where they should not and without asking, dirtying sacred springs. Snow-caps melt, forests no longer bear fruit: Nature continues to recede.

Meta-causal narratives attributing the increased incidence of illness and accidents in the last few decades to a retributive nature allowed interlocutors to link body and social disorder, articulating them in moral registers. As the fundamental connection Mongolians are said to have with nature circulates as a deep-seated cultural trait in public discourse, transgression of the 'rules' is profoundly unsettling. Interlocutors cited a recent decline in human character coinciding with the onset of the 'age of the market': an increase in greed, selfishness and a lack of respect for nature. Nature upholds social order by punishing those who exhibit 'incorrect' behaviour, the increased incidence of which is linked to postsocialist political economy and lack of state presence.

Crucially, not everyone 'believes' in nature's wrath, reminding us that, although nature-based religious practices were 'officially' banned, they were actively framed as belonging to a 'cultural realm' during the seven state socialist decades of the twentieth century. In recent years, such practices, re-appropriated from public discourse, have integrated into religious and public life with mixed opinions. Whether religion protects, company policy protects, or the state protects, the underlying value of following the rules remains. From mining company director to ordinary citizen, some Mongolians were interested in reminding others of a cosmologically retributive nature with the aim of ordering human behaviour in particular ways. This brings to mind the ways in which *naturalised* rules and customs – that is, couched within the natural world – attempt normatively to regulate and proscribe behaviour, while at the same time masking the power relations and ideology behind them. The natural is especially good at this, as it masquerades as ahistorical. But as we know, the natural world in Mongolia underwent ideological and physical transformations as it was harnessed to remodel society during the twentieth century, to usher in a new Mongolian man and woman. Nature was notionally bound to culture in particular ways during this time, not only in the promotion of nature tourism as a 'cultured' way to spend leisure time, but also the transformed value system around culture as concept; while early associations of culture with 'backwardness' were reshaped to align with the sophisticated and unique,

national culture nevertheless retained a connection to nature in public discourse. That these two concepts are yoked together today renders transgressing nature, for some, highly morally charged, as right and wrong behaviour reflect not only on national character, but human character.

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