

# **The Story of Eej Khad: Mother Spirit of the Earth And her Children**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to collect and present knowledge on the subject of Eej Khad, which translates to Mother Rock, in one single place. Since very little has been written about Eej Khad, it is an attempt to preserve knowledge that might easily be lost. Eej Khad is a widely popular granite rock in central Mongolia that worshippers believe has the power to fulfill their dreams. The information presented in this paper is collected almost entirely from interviews with people willing to share what they know or believe about Eej Khad. It does not judge the opinions of individuals, but rather attempts to place these opinions in a dialogue so that one might speak to or illuminate another. This study collects origin Legends of Eej Khad, of which there are different versions, as well as stories of her actions. It records worship practices, of which there are many variations. It explores explanations of her power, which relate to concepts of land energy. It discusses her relationship with organized religion in Mongolia, namely Shamanism and Buddhism. A rough history is established ending with a look at the current social controversy surrounding the Eej Khad location. In conclusion, this paper links the worship of Eej Khad to a more general Mongolian reverence for Nature. It ends with a consideration of what processes put Eej Khad and Nature as a whole at risk in the modern day.

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## **Introduction**

Eej Khad, which translates to Mother Rock, is a granite stone located on the central Mongolian steppe approximately 120 kilometers south of Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. It is a destination for many people from all over the Mongolian country, and other countries as well. People believe that this stone has the power to fulfill their dreams. They come with offerings, they come to whisper their hopes and desires into her stone body, and leave with the confidence that she will take care of them. The purpose of this project is to collect and record the public knowledge and understanding of Eej Khad as well as to learn how Mongolians experience this site. My objective is to create a full picture of what Eej Khad is and what she means to Mongolians.

To my knowledge, there is only one piece of English-language literature that discusses Eej Khad, an article by Caroline Humphrey written in 1993. Humphrey relays many beliefs regarding Eej Khad that I too encountered in my primary research. There are also some very surprising differences, the largest being the age of Eej Khad. Humphrey writes that the worship of Eej Khad began in the 1970's with the replacement of her stone head after an earth tremor (1993, pp13). My research suggests that the history of Eej Khad goes back hundreds of years and I am confident in this assessment. The fault with Humphrey's research is that she relies on the knowledge of one family. The history of an object like Eej Khad is very difficult to track down. No one person can be trusted for a complete picture.

By collecting knowledge and perspectives from a variety of individuals, I have tried to present a resource of knowledge that is fuller than any single person possesses. It does not judge the opinions of individuals, but rather attempts to place these opinions in a dialogue so that one might speak to or illuminate another.

This study was conducted with knowledgeable people in Ulaanbaatar City, Tuv Aimag Center, and out at the Eej Khad location in Sergelen Soum, Tuv Aimag. The terms *Aimag* and *Soum* refer to governance territories. Mongolia's territory is broken into twenty-one aimags, similar to provinces. Each aimag is subsequently divided into several soums.

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## **Methodology**

In my first meeting with Hamb Lam Dashdawaa he told me that there is very little written about Eej Khad, there is very little research being done, and there are very few people who can tell you the true story. It was clear that my quest to learn about Eej Khad was not going to take place in a library. The only way I would learn about Eej Khad was through talking to people. Therefore my main objective was to track down and collect oral history and oral knowledge. No one person possesses a complete history or understanding, and the pieces that all my various informants provide will never fit together like a perfect puzzle. The story of Eej Khad exists in disparate pieces, shaped by the faults and curiosities of every person's unique, individual memory and experience.

If things I heard didn't fit together or sound realistic to my mind, that was no reason to rule them out. Searching out the "true" story is impossible. The way that Eej Khad exists is in the minds and memories of the people and it is not for me to judge what is right and what is wrong. Every individual conception is a little nudge towards gaining a fuller understanding of what Eej Khad is and who Mongolians are in relation to her. Therefore every opinion and bit of information is as valid as any other. Unfortunately, there is no way to synthesize them all into one cohesive paper. They are recorded in my field notes, but I cannot include them all here.

In order to achieve the fullest understanding of Eej Khad I knew I would have to talk to people from different levels of experience, different localities, different generations, and different religions. It is impossible to identify every possible perspective and search out a person who exemplifies it. In this study I tried to cover the major ones. I talked to local people of different generations, I talked to casual visitors with different levels of knowledge and experience, and I talked to Buddhists as well as a shaman and explored Eej Khad from both perspectives.

The information in this paper is drawn almost entirely from the interviews I held over the course of my research. It is this kind of information that I consider most valuable and worthy to collect when time is short. This information is fragile. Especially since most of my main informants are old, this information might easily be lost. I am hopeful that I was able to record and preserve at least a decent portion of what they know.

## **Profiles of My Main Informants**

***Hamb Lam Dashdawaa.*** He is the 73-year-old head lama of Eej Khad's monastery and current "owner" of the Eej Khad site. He was born in Batsengel Soum, Arkhangai Aimag. He first heard of Eej Khad in 1963 and first visited her in 1965. In 1996 he took over ownership of the site. He says that he collected his knowledge of Eej Khad from old lamas and local people.

***Nyamkhagva.*** He is a 39-year-old man born in Ugtaan Soum, Tuv Aimag. He first came to Eej Khad in 1992. He moved here to work as the Hamb Lam's driver in 2000. It is his current profession.

***Chunag.*** He is a 79-year-old local man born in Altanbulag Soum, Tuv Aimag. His family has lived in this area and worshipped Eej Khad for eight generations. He has been going to Eej Khad since he was a child and has lived nearby her most of his life. He is the second oldest man in Sergelen Soum. He currently lives in Tuv Aimag Center. His wife also contributed her knowledge to our conversations.

***Byambasaikhan.*** Chunag's 26-year-old son. He has learned a lot from his father but also has some divergent opinions. He knows many stories about the power of Eej Khad.

***Sergelen Soum Governor Mendsaikhan.*** He is in his early forties and has been the soum governor for four years. He is a local man whose family has worshipped Eej Khad for six generations. His knowledge of Eej Khad has been passed down to him through those generations.

*Shaman Byambadorj.* He is in his fifties and is a well-known, sought after shaman based in Ulaanbaatar. He has written a song about Eej Khad and organizes annual ceremonies at the site.

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## What and Where is She?

*Eej Khad* (*Eej* means “mother,” *Khad* means “rock” in Mongolian language) is a granite rock located in Sergelen Soum, Tuv Aimag, approximately 120 kilometers south of Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia. What is special about this rock is that it is naturally formed. This is a natural sacred site; it is not man made like a monastery or monument. Currently, though, she is surrounded by a tall, circular wall and dressed up in clothes, a long ponytail covered in donated hair clips dropping down her backside (These man made additions were not present for most of her history. They are additions of Hamb Lam Dashdawaa) .

The rock herself sits in the sloping cup of a mountain, partially encircled by its semicircular ridge-like peak. This mountain is called Avdar Bayan Uul (*Avdar* means “chest,” *Bayan* means “rich,” and *Uul* means “mountain” in Mongolian language). An essential piece of furniture in the traditional Mongolian ger was a sturdy chest where the family would keep all of their valuables. Avdar Bayan Uul is perceived as a chest and this mountain spirit’s precious cargo is Eej Khad herself. He looks after her, guards her.

The sloping area in which she sits is known as Nariin Ekh. It is also known as Ikher Bulag, which translates to “Twin Springs.” Along the peak of Avdar Bayan Uul two small mounds are visible, the source of these two springs.

These springs would flow down the slope and cross each other at a point about a hundred yards north of Eej Khad. The springs continued to flow, encircling Eej Khad, and once past her combining into a single larger stream. Today they no longer flow. The possible reasons for this will be discussed later in this paper.

Chunag, an old local man, says that there are over ten springs on the mountain of Avdar Bayan Uul. Many of them were highly revered by lamas, who would collect their waters to use as medicine for the sick. Two of the most important springs he knows are Toiduudiin Rashaan and Amriin Rashaan. They are particularly good for health. Dashstermaa, a middle-aged local woman, told of another spring called Doiti. It is especially good for the stomach. Chunag summed up his beliefs concerning the little zone surrounding Eej Khad when he said: Everything in this area is good.

There are also other special rocks in this area. Yembuu Khad is a rock with the power to make people rich. There are all sorts of procedures for rubbing money on the rock to receive it's blessing. Mendsaikhan, Sergelen Soum governor, believes that it is almost as old as Eej Khad. Next to Yembuu Khad is the Camel Rock, resembling the two humps of a bactrian camel. Women straddle this rock and slide from one end to the other over the humps. It is said to be good for women's health.

Ham Lam Dashdawaa tells about other rocks in the area. Nearby Eej Khad are three guardian rocks: Lion Rock, Frog Rock, and Dog Rock (named so because of their shapes). He says that they were placed by the spirits to protect Eej Khad. I never saw anyone approach Lion Rock, but I did see offerings made

to Frog Rock. Dog Rock, though, is by far the most visited. It protects Eej Khad from the Northeast, the bad direction. It also has healing powers. People get down and rub their bodies against Dog Rock for relief from specific pains or just good health overall. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa attributes his good health and strength in old age to the power of the Dog Rock.

Another rock that Dashdawaa believes is very important at this site is the Three Gods Rock. It is a tall rock that stands up the mountain slope to east of Eej Khad. Dashdawaa says that three feminine Buddhist deities, White Tara, Bujinlham, and Yanjinlham, sit in this rock and watch over Eej Khad. There is a shelf in the rock that you can climb to and sit in shelter. Lamas sometimes hold meditations there.

Though the belief in Yembuu Khad may be old, local people say that all these other rocks are new. They believe that the Hamb Lam is responsible for the new worship of these rocks, and are skeptical about the truth behind it. In the beginning it was just Eej Khad that was considered special. For the old men Chunag and Dagwaandseren, Eej Khad is still the only one they believe in. Nyamlkhagva feels the same.

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## **Understanding Her Name**

I encountered two reasons why this rock is called Eej Khad, Mother Rock. The first explanation is that it is a result of the form of the rock. The rock itself is roughly shaped like a person. It is a tall rock with the suggestive form of breasts and shoulders. Several of my informants, including Munkhur (a middle-aged local

man), Chunag, and Hamb Lam Dashdawaa told me, not without an element of comedy, that this feminine shape is suggestive of a very particular action: a woman squatting to urinate behind the cover of her *del*. The *del* is a traditional Mongolian garment, a long robe-like coat that is tied at the waist with a sash or belt.

In a vast open steppe where one has to provide one's own cover for privacy, the *del* is also known as the "Mongolian toilet." In order to use this toilet the wearer keeps her arms inside, not in the sleeves, and does not tie the belt. Like this she have a roomy tent of fabric surrounding her. Only her head is uncovered as she does her private business with free hands beneath. In Mongolia, women are sometimes referred to as *buusgui*, without a belt. This interpretation of Eej Khad's shape is backed up by the fact that she has no belt, she has no arms, and her body is ill defined below the breasts, widening as it touches the ground, like an untied *del*. Beginning around 1970, worshippers placed a round stone on her shoulders, at last giving her body a head and making her anthropomorphic shape, which may have been missed by some, much less subtle. It is unclear how long this interpretation of Eej Khad has existed, but two of the origin legends of Eej Khad (which appear later in this paper) attempt to explain her absence of a head, revealing the fact that her human form has been recognized for a long time, long before she was given a head to make it obvious.

Munkhur says that they call her *eej*, mother, because she looks like a female person. Rather than calling her "girl" or "woman" people chose to call her "mother." Simple. In her article, Humphrey writes that a bulge is perceived in the

belly of the rock, suggesting that she is pregnant (1993). This is another clear reason to call her mother, though I did not encounter this interpretation of the rock in the course of my own research.

But to some people's mind there is more to her name than can be linked to her physical appearance. The second reason why she is called Eej Khad is more ideological. Mendsaikhan said it like this: In most countries you worship the father, but in Mongolia you worship the Mother. Nyamlkhagva says simply, without a mother you cannot live. The general consensus is that mothers are generous, kind, and indiscriminating. People from Japan, Korea, and many other countries (like America) come to Eej Khad. She helps them all, says Mendsaikhan.

Mothers are also merciful and forgiving. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa says that criminals often come to Eej Khad to ask for reduced punishments. In one instance, a man who had stolen ten horses and slaughtered them for their meat, which he then sold, was given a very lenient sentence because he came to Eej Khad to ask for mercy, explains Dashdawaa. Therefore Eej Khad's actions reveal her to be a motherly spirit and hence deserving of the title

The original name of Eej Khad was *Avgai* Eej; the name Eej Khad is a relatively new name. *Avgai* is a respected term for women in the Mongolian language and the phrase as a whole might translate to "Honored Mother." Old locals like Chunag and Dagwaandseren still call her that. Other people like Munkhur and his wife Dashtsermaa simply call her Eej, Mother. I asked Nyamlkhagva whether or not he thought of Eej Khad as a second mother to him.

Yes, he said, I think that a lot of people do. This assertion certainly held up through the course of my interviews. Eej Khad is a mother spirit, and the people who come to her, who she takes care of year after year, are her children.

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## **A Spiritual Context**

Walther Heissig, in his survey of Mongolian religious life, writes that Mongolians traditionally believe that Nature is alive with the spirits of land, water, and sky (or the heavens). Every mountain and every river has a spirit owner with a personality and an individual will. These spirits preside over a certain area of land and the people living within these areas depend on remaining in their good graces. Every act of Nature is perceived as the will of the spirits, Heissig observes. It is the action of spirits that make these things happen. This includes the weather, the seasons, the migrations of animals, flooding, anything that happens in the natural world.

Mountains and stones in particular are worshipped and revered by Mongolians. Caroline Humphrey describes how the concept of the mountain links to concepts of permanence and everlasting power (1996, pp. 86-89). A Mongolian never speaks the name of a mountain within its area because mountain spirits can be particularly wrathful. For fear of this anger, Mongolians give offerings to the mountains in order to keep them happy, writes Humphrey. When Mongolians would move to a new home-site, they used to play songs to please the spirits of that area and ask for welcome.

I have witnessed many times a morning ritual that links to this belief in Nature spirits. Every morning, Mongolian women take the top of the day's tea outside from the *ger*, the Mongolian portable dwelling made from felt and a wooden frame, and offer it to the spirits of nature. It is food for the spirits, a way of keeping them happy and showing respect. Milk feeds all spirits, says Hamb Lam Dashdawaa, It is the best of foods.

But there are specific kinds of offerings for the different spirits. Rice feeds the water spirits since it grows in water. Sand feeds the land. And salt feeds the sky because the salt lakes get their water from the sky. There are many ways of explaining offerings, and differentiating them, but it is important to remember that all spirits, land, water, and sky are interconnected and interdependent.

Eej Khad, being a natural object possessive of a powerful nature spirit, is not unique. She is actually somewhat typical in Mongolia. In the course of this study I learned about many other powerful sites. Nyamlkhagva told of a mountain near to Eej Khad that contains silver. Some men came to mine it and the mountain's spirit grew angry, he says. A violent thunderstorm erupted suddenly and all the miners were killed. Chunag and his wife told about a rock in Unjiil Soum, Tuv Aimag. It is a long rock, lying lengthwise on the ground. One day some teenagers stood it up on its end. The weather suddenly grew very bad but when they returned the rock to its original position the storm dispersed.

Hamb Lam Dashdawaa, among other informants, believe that Eej Khad is connected with two other sites that interact with people similarly to the way she does: Eej Mod in Selenge Aimag and Eej Khairkhan, also in Tuv. *Mod* means tree

in Mongolian language and *Khairkhan* is a respectful term for a sacred mountain. Just like at Eej Khad, people worship these sites by bringing offerings and asking for blessings. Shaman Byambadorj also believes in the connection between three sites. He includes Eej Khad and Eej Mod but instead of Eej Khairkhan he believes that it is Dayan Deerkh, a site in Khuvsgul Aimag in the North of Mongolia and a popular center for shamanism, that completes this triangle.

What is important to understand is that Mongolia is full of places like Eej Khad. But Eej Khad is special. It is perhaps the most popular and well known of any sites like it. It is easily accessible from Ulaanbaatar City where the majority of Mongolia's population lives.

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### **Eej Khad's Power**

Understanding what gives Eej Khad her power to help people depends on understanding the spiritual context that Mongolians live in. Hamb Lama Dashdawaa, Mendsaikhan, and Shaman Byambadorj believe that Eej Khad is a focal point where all three types of spirits (land, water, and sky) are combined. Because of this she is intimately tied in with Nature and its processes, a sense that all my informants espoused. She is connected to the rivers, the mountains, and the sky. Her power is granted from heaven, says Dashdawaa. He believes that her power is most potent in the early morning, in the light of the rising sun.

In discussing her power with my informants, the concept of energy arose. Humphrey writes about three divisions of "invisible energy" recognized by Mongols in the natural world: power (*khuch*), magical energy (*id*), and grandeur

(*suli*) (1996, pp. 85). Suli is the kind of energy that flows from a mountain, which presides over and dominates a landscape. Mountains are inherently and unmistakably male, writes Humphrey; traditionally women are excluded from all mountain worship ceremonies (1996, pp. 86-89).

Even though Eej Khad is a rock, the stuff of mountains, she is not a mountain. Femininity is central to Eej Khad's identity. Shaman Byambadorj called the energy possessed by Eej Khad, *khuch*. She has "power," according to Humphrey's translation. These informants believe that Eej Khad possesses powerful energy and when you are near to her you can absorb that energy. This energy is responsible for helping you to be successful. In Humphrey's observations it is unique objects, objects that stand out in a landscape, that are usually considered to be possessive of greater amounts of energy in the Mongolian tradition (1996, pp. 85). This certainly seems to be the case with Eej Khad and her female form. But that is not to say that other objects are not possessive of energy.

In the Buddhist religion, says Mendsaikhan, every rock is Nature's stupa. The gods of the sky send their energy into rocks on the Earth's surface. The area around Eej Khad is characterized for two to three kilometers around by the presence of many large and interesting rocks (often resembling stacked pancakes). Because of these many rocks Mendsaikhan believes that the area surrounding Eej Khad is also overflowing with positive energy. He says that the Indians call these energy sites Janlow. He notes that individual people can also possess this kind of energy inherently. When you meet them you like them, you want to be with them.

Mendsaikhan says that anything you do in an energy center like Eej Khad will be a success, for example if you read a book you will learn it very well. Sergelen Soum is famous for its champion wrestlers and racehorses. Mendsaikhan believes that this success is due to the energy flowing out of Eej Khad. Dashdawaa told me that Sukhbat, one of Mongolia's most famous wrestlers, worships at Eej Khad. His elder brother Vranseren, a horse breeder, does as well. In 2004, his horses won five national Naadam races. Naadam is the annual Mongolian summer festival when big tournaments in the three "manly games," archery, wrestling, and horse racing, are held.

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## **Worshipping Eej Khad**

People come to Eej Khad with all different levels of knowledge. There are new comers who have no idea what to do, and there are veterans of different schools who carry out their worship in very different ways. And of course, the worship practices surrounding Eej Khad have constantly been changing over time.

Humphrey describes the process that she learned from the family she spoke to. In order to worship Eej Khad, they place their foreheads against her body and whisper what it is they need. Then they walk three times clockwise around the stone (1993, 14).

This process is similar to Chunag's simple procedure, the one he passed on to his family. He circles Eej Khad three times and then prays to her, being sure to make contact skin to stone. Dagwaandseren, the 82-year-old eldest man in Sergelen Soum, doesn't even circle her. He kneels directly in front of her and

presses his hands together in prayer, also being sure to make contact. Both old men Chunag and Dagwaandseren say that touching Eej Khad has healing powers. They rub their bodies on Eej Khad for good health. Dagwaandseren believes that this is in fact better than going to a doctor. When he would visit Eej Khad his health would be good for the entire year after that. He has a bad leg and he would rub it on Eej Khad for relief.

When you are praying to Eej Khad you tell her what it is that you desire and ask that she help fulfill these dreams. In Chunag's time, worshippers made general requests. They asked for good, happy, healthy, successful lives. These days people ask for more specific things. Students come to ask for good grades or to go abroad to study. People ask for jobs or apartments in the city. It is different. These two men, as well as many younger informants, recall that originally people would make simple offerings like milk and meat and animals from their herds. Now they bring candy and bottles, a practice that they say started in 1995 with the coming of the Hamb Lam.

The popular contemporary procedure that I encountered on my first visit, which included these newer developments, was much more elaborate than the preceding ones. A worshipper always wears a cap to cover his or her head. Upon entering the walls, a worshipper lights incense in a large stand near the door to announce his or her presence. Then he lays out his offerings on a little plate, mostly candy and sweet biscuits (perceived as a gift to one's host), and pours milk and vodka into two little cups. He puts these plates on the edge of the offering table right in front of Eej Khad. Next, he circles the space in a clockwise direction

before approaching Eej Khad with khadag in hand. The worshipper ties the khadag onto a belt around Eej Khad's waist and if he is a man he approaches Eej Khad's right shoulder, if she is a woman she approaches Eej Khad's left shoulder. Putting both hands onto her, the worshipper leans in and whispers his or her desires. When he is done, he circles Eej Khad and steps outside the wall with milk and vodka. He circles the wall, offering these things to the spirits by throwing them out into the air by the spoonful. Afterwards, he re-enters the walls and takes his individual plate of offerings, putting half into a large communal bowl and taking half home to share with loved ones.

I witnessed many variations of this procedure. Some people sprinkled birdseed and rice, another form of food for the land. I saw notes with wishes written out on them slipped beneath Eej Khad's del, up close to her body. Some people did in fact bow and worship to the front of Eej Khad, though not many. I saw one woman whispering into the right side, the "man's side." Some people put their offerings directly into the communal bowl, and when they took some home they chose among the whole mix of offerings given by many worshippers. There were always many more women than men worshipping Eej Khad and when there were no men waiting for the right shoulder to give him a clue, I saw a man (obviously a newcomer) waiting in the long line for the left with all of the women. There was also a table where people would put bottles of vodka, some half empty from the offerings and some still sealed. The inner side of the walls surrounding Eej Khad were crusted with dried milk because almost all the people I saw would circle on the inside of the walls, splashing out milk and vodka as if they were

offering it to the walls. This shows a lack of understanding. Milk and vodka are offerings to the spirits of nature and should be thrown out in the open where it can reach them, not to the inside of a structure, said Dashdawaa.

Hamb Lam Dashdawaa says that there are many specific beliefs that have grown up regarding how to properly worship Eej Khad and he doesn't know how they began. The division of a male and female shoulder is one of them.

Mendsaikhan speculates that perhaps since Eej Khad's head was taken to the west, woman worship on her left, her western, shoulder. Women are smarter, after all. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa, Mendsaikhan, Dagwaandseren, and Chunag's family agree that the belief in whispering to one or the other shoulder is relatively recent and that it truly doesn't matter where you choose to speak to Eej Khad. In fact, you don't even have to be near to her.

On the many large and small rocks that cover the landscape around Eej Khad, an observer will see little piles of stones. They can be easy to miss, but once you focus and look for them, you see that they are everywhere. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa explained that this is another popular belief grown up among the people. Worshippers build these little piles of stones and imagine that they are building a home. It is a way of telling Eej Khad that they will be near to her, even when far away. The Hamb Lam doesn't know how this practice began either, but he respects it. He says that it doesn't really matter what you believe. If you truly believe something then it is always a good thing and it will bring good things to you.

A popular belief surrounding the worship practices is that once you come to Eej Khad you must return again one time annually over the next two years. This kind of commitment keeps some people from visiting Eej Khad; they are afraid of what will happen if they do not fulfill it. Since I am an American and won't likely be returning to Eej Khad for a long time, the likelihood that I won't be able to fulfill my commitment is fairly high. But Hamb Lam Dashdawaa and Chunag reassured me. If you cannot return, it is okay. But you must keep this place in your heart and always be worshipping it. You can imagine yourself here from time to time and that will be as good as coming. You will be alright and she will take care of you, said each in his own words.

It really depends on the person, says Dashdawaa, but if you come you should try to return again. Some people really need Eej Khad more than others, he says. The Ham Lam and his employees observe the visitors to Eej Khad. Not long ago he noticed one woman who would come at least once every month. He asked her why and she told him that she owns a food store in Ulaanbaatar. After every visit to Eej Khad her business goes very well for a period, and then sales drop. When this happens her children beg her to visit Eej Khad again and ask for a blessing. Nowadays her business has improved so much that she only visits once a season, four times a year. They have a big two-story store and are doing quite well.

Again, it is genuine belief that makes things happen. Nyamlkhagva says that if you go to Eej Khad, go through the motions, but don't really care and don't

really remember her, then nothing will happen. You have to believe in her power if she is going to help you.

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## **Eej Khad and Religion**

### **Eej Khad and Buddhism**

Mongolian religious life has been dominated by Buddhist ideology for the last several centuries. Eej Khad herself is clothed in the materials of Buddhism. When you enter her walls you light Juniper incense to announce your presence to her. There are prayer beads around her neck and when many people approach her to make their wish they tie *khadags*, a blue silk scarf given in Buddhism to honor someone, around her waist. From the top of the walls that encircle Eej Khad, crossing the space beneath, are cables tied with khadags. They brush the visitors' heads as they wander about this space. There is even a Buddhist shrine within these walls and a large prayer wheel at the entrance.

Hamb Lam Dashdawaa, the current caretaker of Eej Khad, also has a powerful Buddhist *ovoo*, sacred stone cairn, located just north of Eej Khad, within a couple meters of her walls. The Seventh Bogd, Buddhist religious leader in Mongolia, dedicated the *ovoo*. Inside are three *Bomps* initiated by the Dalai Lama and crafted by the Mongolian Buddhist artist Purevbat. *Bomps* are special vases containing 70 substances, including gold, silver, silk, and rice. There is one for land, one for water, and one for sky. *Bomps* increase an *ovoo*'s power, make it almost alive, said Dashdawaa. Every year Purevbat Lama holds a worship ceremony for the *ovoo*.

Most of the people who come to worship Eej Khad are Buddhist, as are most Mongolians in general. Mendsaikhan is a devout Buddhist. For over ten years Mendsaikhan has been organizing an annual worship ceremony for Eej Khad that is presided over by a Buddhist lama. The ceremony lasts all day with dancing, gift giving, and celebration. It is a way to show Eej Khad love and appreciation from the Buddhist community. Mendsaikhan says that special things always happen on these days, for example the weather is always very nice and warm. Mendsaikhan urged me to research Eej Khad from the perspective of the Buddhist faith.

### **Eej Khad and Shamanism**

Before Buddhism came to Mongolia, Shamanism was the main religious belief held by the people. Elements of Shamanism found their way into Buddhism and vice versa. Many people who call themselves Buddhists still believe in Shamanism as well. According to Byambadorj, Eej Khad is one of Mongolian shamanism's most important shrines, or *shuteen*.

Located a few meters up the slope, away from Eej Khad's walls in a southeastern direction, is another ovoo, a shaman's ovoo. Shamans have worshipped at Eej Khad for a long time, both independently and as a group. Every year at the end of May the shaman Byambadorj holds a ceremony with four or five other shamans around this ovoo. Shamans specialize in talking with spirits. For this reason, Nyamkhagva postulated that the shamans might relate to Eej Khad better than any other religion. In this ceremony they talk to Eej Khad's spirit, or *ongot*. She tells them about the things she has done, for example why she

has helped some people and not others. The Shamans talking with Eej Khad make requests on behalf of other people who need help, entrusting their fates to her powerful spirit.

Another important purpose of the Shamans' ceremony is to absorb some of Eej Khad's powerful energy. Byambadorj says that they take this energy away with them and use it to augment their own powers. This way they have even greater power to help the people that they see on a daily basis.

The Shaman Byambadorj has a great belief in Eej Khad. The following is a poem/song he wrote about her. He has a large printout of it hanging in the waiting area of his office for all to read. It was translated, though not as skillfully as would be ideal, from the original Mongolian by my translator and I. I am told that many of the words he uses are special words with specific connotations that are lost when translated into English. I am also told that the English version is much easier to understand than the original. Much of the depth and mystery is lost. This is clearly not a good thing. But I do hope that it offers some insight into how he feels about Eej Khad. It is partially addressed to Eej Khad herself and takes place in the course of a spirit possession. That is why the reference shifts.

“Tuv Aimag’s Eej Khad’s Song”  
*(Written by shaman D. Byambadorj)*

Their home is made of rocks  
Their body is made of rocks  
By Nariin Jargalant’s river  
Souls are running around my country  
They pass through Zaraa Tolgoi  
Local deities are running on its edge  
By the road’s many ovoos  
The local deities visit  
Yembuu Khad is their chest of stone  
Ninety-nine heavens are there (referring to all types of shamans’ souls)

Udgan is good for mothers  
 I will sit in front of you and pray  
 And ensure my life  
 Khurai, Khurai, Khurai (Said when accepting a great gift)  
 Shaug, Shaug, Shaug (sharp call shamans make during ceremony)  
 When you are coming give us your love  
 When you are leaving give us your generosity and charity  
 Give your people your generosity/charity  
 All my plans  
 Please help to make them happen quickly  
 All my dreams  
 Please help them to come true  
 You always take care of my life  
 Avdar Khairkhan ensures my life  
 You always take care of my life  
 Eej Khairkhan ensures my life  
 Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
 Shaug, Shaug, Shaug  
 My beautiful granite mother  
 Please help my mind  
 Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
 My beautiful stone mother  
 Please help all good things I see to come to me  
 Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
 My beautiful Udgan (female shaman) Mother  
 Please keep me safe from danger  
 Our Local people, our migrating people  
 Please help us all in our work  
 Ooh Khairkhaan!  
 When you are coming give us your love  
 When you are leaving give us your generosity and charity  
 I will tell my precious shrine  
 About your great age and ask her to give you still more years  
 I will ask my spirit shrine  
 To add to your profits  
 Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
 Shaug, Shaug, Shaug  
 I will ask my eyeless land, sky, and water spirits  
 To sort out your sins and good deeds  
 I will ask my tongue-less land, sky, and water spirits  
 To help accomplish your wishes  
 Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
 Shaug, Shaug, Shaug  
 Please help clear the way for my future  
 Please help my fortune  
 By Sergelen Soum

The souls are running around  
I came for  
Help in achieving my goals  
I came for  
The well being of my mind  
Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
Shaug, Shaug, Shaug  
Until this time next year  
Please live a healthy, happy, good life  
Do not get sick, do not die  
Do not be put in danger  
Let everything be like a clean mirror  
Khurai, Khurai, Khurai  
Shaug, Shaug, Shaug

Chunag, upon reading this poem, was very pleased. He says that the meaning is true. It is a good poem. It encapsulates people's relationship to Eej Khad, the exchange that takes place, the debt that her worshippers owe her, the love that they feel, and the way that they should treat her and think of her.

### **Eej Khad and Every Religion**

Despite the fact that Dashdawaa is a Buddhist lama, despite the fact that Mendsaikhan urged me to research Eej Khad from the perspective of Buddhism and confessed to me that he doesn't really like shamans, both men agree that every religion can come to Eej Khad to worship and be helped. This thought was echoed by almost all the people that I talked to. Dashdawaa said that all religions have the same purpose, the same meaning. It is only the practices that are different. Every person who comes to Eej Khad has the same purpose. They are hoping that she will grant them some of her powerful energy. Nyamlkhagva says that he has seen both Christians and Muslims at the Eej Khad site.

Dashdawaa even went so far as to say that Eej Khad is actually nonreligious. She is something different. Nyamlkhagva, the Hamb Lam's driver, might agree. He confessed that he is really a nonreligious person. He only practices some Buddhism because he is an employee of the Hamb Lam. The only thing he prays to is Eej Khad, he says. And he truly believes in her power because she has helped him so much in his life.

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## **The Legends of Eej Khad: Stories of a Woman**

The vast majority of the people I met and spoke to about Eej Khad had little idea about this sacred stone's origin. What they knew was that it was old and it was powerful. But they could not tell me how it was formed. Of course, there are clues in the very name and appearance of the stone. She is kind and generous like a mother. Her stone body reflects that of a woman in flesh. Sure enough these aspects of today's Eej Khad are reflected in the three legends I was able to learn. One came from an old local man Chunag, another from Sergelen Soum Governor Mendsaikhan, and the third from Hamb Lam Dashdawaa.

### **Chunag's Story**

*Chunag's family has lived in the vicinity of Eej Khad for eight generations and as long as they have lived there they have worshipped Eej Khad. He shared this story with me on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007 at his home in Tuv Aimag Center.*

When the world began, Eej Khad began too. She is that old. At that time, there was a very smart, kind, helpful, and generous woman living in this area. She was a very good woman in life. She was abandoned by her husband in the wilderness and when she died her soul became a rock. At that time people began to worship the rock and the rock would help them in turn.

### **Mendsaikhan's story**

*Mendsaikhan's family has lived in the area around Eej Khad for six generations. The legend he tells is around two hundred years old and has been passed orally through the generations. Mendsaikhan's grandparents taught it to him when he was young. He shared this story with me on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007 in Ulaanbaatar City. I have taken the taken the essential elements of the story and added the sensory details that were lost to me in translation.*

In the present day area of Eej Khad lived a noble woman who was very smart and very beautiful. She loved her homeland very much, but as a woman she knew that she was not likely to stay there all her life. There is a saying in Mongolia: Women and the antelope have no country. This is because the antelope is always running about and a woman, when she marries, is taken away by her husband to his own homeland. She knew that this would likely happen to her, that she would have no choice. Sure enough, no matter what she might have tried, she caught the eye of a famous and noble military commander. He wanted her for his bride and though she did not love him he took her far away to his home in the West of Mongolia.

The commander soon discovered that not only was this woman learned and delicate, she was also a very good rider and brave, characteristics that a commander in the military could not resist. The commander's love grew stronger than ever, and over time the woman learned to love him too. They lived together in his western home until the age of fifty, but they still did not have any children. In Mongolia, if a woman does not bear children she is usually cast out by her husband and ostracized by her neighbors. But this man's love was still strong. Every night he sat enthralled in the light of the candle as she shared her vast knowledge of history and legends. And every day he was grateful for her good, wise advice. Despite the long wear of the years her wit was as sharp as ever and her beauty just as clear. For all these reasons, he could not be angry with her even if she did not give him children. He could not part with her. But this woman's thoughts were of a different nature. She was dreaming of her homeland. Without children, there was nothing to tie her to her husband in the West. She told her husband that she wanted to leave him and go back to her land in the central Mongolia. Because of his great respect for her, he reluctantly agreed.

She moved back to her country and was very happy there. She missed the land, her horses, and all of her many relatives. Her husband stayed in his home in the west and married again. His new wife gave him children and they lived together for several years. But his yearning for the woman he let go grew up in him and eventually he left his new family to find her and bring her back. He rode east to her home and when he found her he told her that he could not live without her there. He needed her back. The woman was strong and she refused. Her love for her own land and her own people was stronger than her love for him. She knew that she could not have children, but she still wanted to help her people and do what she could to take care of them. She also told him that she was getting old and that it was her desire to die in her own country. She reassured him that he could go on without her.

But he could not cope with the thought and he said, “If you really want to stay in your home, your body can stay in this land, but I will take your head. Inside your head is all the knowledge and wisdom that I need and love about you.” The woman chose to die in her country rather than live the rest of her life in his country. The man left for his home carrying her head, like a herder carries that of a cherished animal that has died out on the steppe. The body he left behind transformed into a rock and remained in her homeland.

From that time, many people came to worship Eej Khad. In life, the woman prized horses, children, and family more than anything. These days people coming to Eej Khad for help are most often herders searching for their lost horses, men and women searching for a life companion, or husband and wife wishing for children. Though in life this woman could not have a family, she wanted to help other people to have their own. She was a good woman that radiated a powerful energy that still remains in the rock and attracts people to it. She was a very brave and strong woman and she lived in her country despite the forces pulling her away.

In the legend, the woman was Khalkh people and her husband was Oold people. From that time when she died they have always been fighting.

### **Hamb Lam Dashdawaa’s Story**

*The following story was told to me by Hamb Lam Dashdawaa in Ulaanbaatar City on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Dashdawaa is not a local of the area around Eej Khad but says he collected his knowledge from old people who are. It was passed on to me via oral translation. Because of this, much of the drama that would make it an enjoyable story was lost. I have taken the framework of essential details and fleshed it out into a more lifelike narrative.*

Three hundred years ago in Ekh Bolhagk, Tuv Aimag, near to the present day location of Eej Khad, there lived a very poor family. The wife was with child and nearing the end of her pregnancy. The husband was greatly anticipating the birth of a son, his first child. He had prepared a lambskin to swaddle him in and the leather strap for the noose of the boy's horse catching pole which, when he grew strong, he would use to gallop the steppe catching horses from the wild herd and breaking them to his will, the proud pursuit of every Mongolian herdsman. But when the child was born it was a girl. The father ignored this baby girl. He wanted nothing to do with her. In Mongolia, it is said that when a girl is born the parents will not think of it as their baby, but rather as someone else's child. This is because when a girl grows and marries, she leaves her family. She lives with her husband's line and cares only for them. She has no choice because inevitably she will meet a boy and fall in love. Inevitably she will marry him. However, when a boy is born he stays with his parents, bringing his wife to them. When his parents grow old he takes care of them. When they retire he takes charge of their animals. A boy keeps the fire. A boy repays his debt.

Nonetheless, no matter how poor this man and wife were, heaven gave them a girl. This girl was born and she lived, if somewhat unhappily. As the story goes, when she was eighteen years old, the flower of youth, she fell in love with a boy and the two became very, very close. They began to consider marriage, but for now she still lived with her parents. When she was walking through the rich grasses one day collecting argal for her mother's stove, the lord of Khentii, out on

a trip to survey his lands, caught sight of her. He was in awe of her beauty and decided that he needed to have that beauty in his home, to in turn awe his guests and augment his grandeur. She told him of her love, the boy, and the lord assured her that he would not take her as his wife, but rather as something beautiful to be worshipped, looked upon but not touched. The girl was poor and desperate. She agreed to live and serve in his house for three years. Before she left with the lord she went to her boyfriend and they swore that their love was strong, that they would wait for one another.

After three years had passed she made the long ride back to her home. Her mare's step was slow, but her mind was racing, full of dreams, anticipating a tender reunion with her love. When she reached the town and asked after him, she was told that in her absence he had married someone else. The hurt tore through her. She had been hurting from loneliness all her life. This boy was the only one who had ever loved her and held her, save her mother to the breast, and that rather grudgingly. Now all that loneliness came back to her with greater force than ever before because her hopes were high and her guard was down. The people, feeding off whatever tide of delusions always fuel the hurtful actions of humanity, ridiculed her. They called her bad and they called her ugly. They laughed at her because she had spent all those years in the Lord's home and she had failed to win him. He refused her, did not want her after all. He threw her back into her loneliness and poverty.

In the heat of defensive anger she rode furiously to her love's new ger. He came out to meet her calls, leaving his wife and baby inside behind the thick felt

door. Upon seeing him for the first time since they swore their love three years before, her mind cleared and she spoke firmly, quietly, "People say that a woman is short hearted, but now I see that a man's feelings of love, trust, and patience are gone in just a moment. I was true to my oath. I did not marry the lord. I was only there to please his eyes. I kept my virginity for you. You threw me away, but I will remain in this land. I will be seen. And despite all the pain it has brought to me, I will return that pain with a gift of happiness and dreams come true." She rode away slowly, to a special place where she had played with the boy when they were innocent friends, too young to know about the beauty, and dangers, of the love between men and women. In this spot she began to pray to the spirits of land, water, and sky to take her. In life she could bring happiness to no one, she felt. On this high hill, the vast steppe spreading for hundreds of miles around her, distant mountain peaks blurring with the immense dome of the blue sky above her, and the babbling waters of two pure springs flowing on either side of her, she prayed.

The evening grew chill and she was beginning to lose a sense of her body when she heard the plodding hooves of many horses come up over the ridge. The riders called to her. It was an envoy from the lord. He was afraid that she would not be received well back in her home and he had sent some of his men to check on her. He told them to tell her that if she needed him, he would do whatever it took. Coming back to her self, she told the envoy to bring word to the lord, "I will be his queen." And as quick as the lord could, he came to her.

They held a great wedding celebration in her home, her birth land, and he honored her and respected her with the depth of genuine feeling. However, he

made sure that all would see it. Everyone in the area, all those who had ridiculed her so cruelly, were invited to witness it. It was a very happy time for both of them. The lord truly loved her and respected her. Those three years that she had lived with him, he had longed to be with her, but he knew that she was devoted to another, and he would not hurt her. He saw that this devotion, to a boy he had never seen, was what sustained her. When he received her message from the envoy he had sent, it was a secret, guilty dream turned reality.

After some time of celebrations, they had to return to the lord's land. They packed up and as they were riding over the very spot where the girl and her old love had played as children, where just a month earlier she had prayed so fervently to the spirits, she felt a need to get off her horse, to touch her feet to that soil. Upon contacting the ground the girl's youthful flesh transformed into stone. Her dog, who had been jogging alongside the party, dodging in and out among the horses' hooves, curled up on the ground upon the sight. It was a deliberate, watchful gesture. Within a moment, he too turned to stone. The lord, turning behind him, cried in horror and fell to the earth, face wrought with pain. But his wise advisor dismounted and kneeling beside him he comforted the lord. He told him, "Lord, this is not a bad thing that has happened. Do not worry. The spirits of this land have received her. Let her stay... But she is your queen, and you may take her head." The lord cut off her head with his sword and, tucking it gently into the chest of his del, he rode on to his native home. Normally tall, proud, and strong, this time his body hung forward, practically resting on his stallion's clipped mane. It was not the physical weight of the stone at his chest that caused

him to hunch over. It was the weight of his sorrow, which he could not help. He knew that it was an honor that this girl had been taken by the spirits, brought to live among them. It was proof of her purity. But for that very reason he would always miss her.

The stone body of the girl stood there on that high hill for many years. It outlasted the lord, it outlasted her boy love, it outlasted his child. It saw other children come to play, other vital women with dreams in their heads, other strong young men herding their animals. It outlasted all of them as well...

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### **Brief Analysis of the Legends**

All three of these stories possess very central common elements. Chunag's simple story of only a few lines may serve as a more neutral template of bare elements for the expounded narratives passed on to me by Mendsaikhan and Dashdawaa.

All three stories agree that Eej Khad was a very good and generous woman in life, she was dedicated to helping the people of her homeland, and when she died she became a rock with the power to do just that. All three contain elements of abandonment, abused love, and unfulfilled dreams. The woman in the story is intimately tied to her homeland. The idea that a nobleman is one of the central characters shows up in Mendsaikhan and Dashdawaa's stories. The idea that the relationship between the woman and the nobleman began without mutual love, but grew into it is also common. Both of these are left undefined in Chunag's. In the two lengthier stories, the taking of her head is a climactic

moment of great significance. Again, this is not mentioned in Chunag's, but the possibility is not ruled out.

So many commonalities suggest that these stories have a single source and diverged over time to become what they are today. As often happens, the personal values of the storytellers found their way into the story itself and some of the less elemental details began to change. A very interesting opposition of this kind exists between Mendsaikhan and Dashdawaa's stories. It involves the character of the girl. Mendsaikhan's girl is a noble person and well liked by all because of her goodness and in spite of her faults (i.e. an inability to have children). Dashdawaa's is a very poor girl who is often undeservedly shunned and abused but still manages to maintain her goodness and good will to the very people that hurt her. As we can see, the differences between these stories are also very telling.

An important divergent feature of Dashdawaa's story is that it is unfinished. Both Chunag and Mendsaikhan end with the immediate worship of the rock. At that time, the Khalkh people were living in the area of Eej Khad. The woman herself was Khalkh and it was the Khalkh who discovered her. An opposing belief that I found, however, is that it was the Barag people who first discovered her and spread her worship. The Barag people migrated from Hulenbuur, Inner Mongolia at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century and were settled in central Mongolia by the Bogd Khan, the last king of Mongolia. Perhaps it is because there is a large population of Barags in this area that many people associate a belief in Eej Khad with them.

In the following story, Dashdawaa's legend continues with a lengthy account of how Eej Khad was first discovered, hundreds of years after she was formed, by a poor Barag man:

**Hamb Lam Dashdawaa's  
Story of How Eej Khad Was First Discovered and Worshipped.**

*Hamb Lam Dashdawaa tells me that the young man in this story was actually a real person. Dashdawaa has met with Yundemvanchig's eldest daughter, who is now 78 years old. She verified that this was in fact the true story of her father. Again, I used the basic details to elaborate a more lifelike narrative.*

Among the Barags, newly come to central Mongolia, there was a very poor, single young man named Yundemvanchig. The year was 1909, perhaps 1910. He lived alone in a small black ger with nothing but a broken pot and a cracked meat plate, the spirits long gone from these broken vessels. The outside of his ger was equally poor. No cows came home with the sunset, no goats or sheep huddled in close for the night. Yundemvanchig didn't have a single animal to herd, nor a single horse to ride.

One night he was outside sleeping (nothing and no one tied him to his ger, after all) when in his dreams he saw a beautiful, middle aged woman. With the unbridled will to change that only dreams possess, this older woman suddenly turned into a younger, married woman. She was dressed in all the accessories of a traditional Mongolian bride, hair plaits spread wide, jewelry jangling, and robes rustling. Then, in his dream, this woman began to nudge him, to rouse him from his sleep. When he awoke he looked for her. He was confused. The layers of his

dream tangled with his reality. He did not find the young woman, but above his sleeping head there loomed a tall rock, silhouetted in the light of the moon and stars. He had lain near this rock because he felt that it would shelter him from the wind on this high hill. Now he sensed something more. There was an energy in this rock. He felt inside that it was this rock that had appeared in his dream. With tenderness and beauty, this rock could take care of him. Sitting up from his blanket, he scooted nearer to the rock and in a slightly awed whisper he said, "If you have the power, if you have the energy, please help me." And he asked for four things: he asked for some sheep, he asked for a young girl to marry, he asked for a horse to ride, and he also asked that the community would come to know him, respect him. Right now he felt invisible. Feeling comforted and safe, he went back to sleep at the foot of the rock and he did not wake till morning.

The next day he was wandering about when a local man rode up to him. He had just been to his herd of horses and he had a few of them in tow. This man recognized Yundemvanchig and knew that he was a very poor young man. In a gesture of generosity that came totally unexpected to Yundemvanchig, he separated one horse's lead from the tangle he had in his hand and tossed it to the poor man standing in the grass. From atop his saddle he said, "You are grown up now. You need a horse to ride." With that he road off, leaving the beast and bewildered man standing there, both stunned with the sudden change.

It wasn't very long after that, perhaps later that very day, when the same generous man came riding up to Yundemvanchig once again. With him was a fully outfitted horse and he handed down the reigns. "I know that you do not own

a bridle or saddle. Take this horse as well,” said the man. Then the man rode off, leaving Yundemvanchig with two horses, a bridle, and a saddle, when just that morning he had none.

With his two new horses, but no animals to herd, Yundemvanchig began to spend his time riding around the community visiting gers, trying to kindle up relationships. On one visit his host, an old man, said to him, “Yundemvanchig, I remember how you used to sing songs so beautifully when you were younger. Don’t you know how women love a beautiful singer? You shouldn’t be on your own when you’ve got a voice like that. Let me tell you what you should do. In the evening, around sunset, all the young women are out of their gers milking their animals. At this time you should climb a high hill and sing your hardest. Send your beautiful song out over the steppe. Look around you as you sing. Somewhere out there will be a woman so enchanted that she will take her hands from her work, stand up and look around her, peering, trying to find the source of the song. That is the woman you want. Ride to her ger and only good things can happen.”

Excited by the prospect, Yundemvanchig decided to try out the old man’s advice that same evening. He rode for a while that afternoon, long past his own familiar community into the territory of some other families he did not know. Up on a hill he sang and sure enough a woman stood looking for the source. When the song was over he hopped up on his horse and rode in her direction. Distances on the vast steppe can be very deceiving and several times he lost sight of the ger, riding down in among folds in the land and tall grasses. But he kept going in that general direction and eventually he made it. He slowed down, dismounted, tied

his horse to the line. and walked with baited breath up to the door of the ger. He could not see anyone outside, but inside he heard the sound of a crackling argal fire, a spoon scraping on the inside of a bowl.

He parted the felt doorway and stepped in to the growing darkness. In his excitement he could hardly stand the time it took for his eyes to adjust. Sitting on a tiny wooden stool in the glow of the stove fire, stirring fresh milk in the pot, was an old woman. He could see that from the moment he entered. He was hoping that he would see something, someone else in the deeper shadows of the ger. But his sharpening eyes revealed nothing. Could it be that he had lost his way, come to the wrong ger? Yundemvanchig was very disappointed as he sat there cross-legged on the floor, still peering hopefully into the shadows. The old woman sat there calmly humming a little song to herself. She was comfortable in his presence, but could sense his eagerness to leave. When he began to get up she said, "I know you are young, but you are still a Mongolian. Why are you leaving when I have something cooking in our pot? This is milk. You must at least have some hot milk before you go. The heat in your belly will fortify you against the evening chill." Of course he agreed, settling back down with an inward sigh.

Once the milk had begun to boil, she ladled him a bowl and passed it around the bagan. It was very hot and took a long time to sip. But even warm milk could not calm his nerves and when he had gotten down to the bottom of the bowl, one easy sip to go, he was preparing inwardly to leave. But suddenly the felt doors parted... And in walked an old man, the master of the ger. Mongolians are very used to unexpected, even unfamiliar guests, and the old man began to

chat casually with Yundemvanchig, unaware of the restlessness within the young man. He ladled a bowl of piping hot milk for himself and refilled Yundemvanchig's while he was at it.

The old herdsman asked what Yundemvanchig was doing round these parts so late and he told him that he was out looking for his herd of horses. He felt bad about lying to the man, but he felt even more foolish telling the truth. "Ah," said the old man, "Why don't you just spend the night here. There is no point searching for your animals in the dark. It is late and you have come from so far away. Both you and the horses need some rest tonight." Not wanting to betray his lie, Yundemvanchig agreed. The old man directed the young man to a nearby stream where he watered his horse. He watched as she drank up big, deep gulps from the little stream. Then he walked her back to the ger, took off her saddle, and tied up her forelegs with a piece of rawhide so that she could graze around the ger, but couldn't go too far in the course of the night.

Again he entered the ger to find that they had laid some blankets and extra delts on the floor for him, but he noticed that his hosts were not getting into their beds just yet. They were waiting for something. Soon he could hear a horse approaching and the low sound of many little hooves, sheep and goat, moving in close to the ger. It sounded like rain as they walked in mass over the gravel. Soon they settled and through the felt of the ger he began to hear all the sounds that accompany the de-saddling of a horse. He heard the jangling of stirrups as this mystery person came nearer. Obviously they intended to stay here. The saddle was dropped by the door, and then the felt parted one final time that night. It was

a young woman, their daughter. She had been out late bringing in the sheep and goats. From the way she moved, her silhouette, he recognized her as the woman he spied from atop the hill. From this night on, Yundemvanchig became a regular visitor in that ger and a special relationship between him and the young woman blossomed.

In his dreams over the next couple weeks, of course he thought of the young woman, but he also thought of the tall rock on the hill. As their relationship grew more serious he knew that he would have to bring the girl to his own ger soon. He was ashamed of his dirty black ger and couldn't bear the thought of showing it to her. One morning he awoke early with these restless thoughts and concerns that wouldn't let him sleep. He knew what he had to do. He made the trip to the tall rock on the hill and gave her thanks, he told her what was bothering him, and then he asked her this, "Please, turn my dirty, black, small ger into a nice, big, white ger." However strange he felt doing this, he knew that there was power in the rock. The events of the last couple weeks could not have been a coincidence when before that so little had changed for him in so long a time. He climbed back down the hill to prepare for the rest of his day.

Ever since he had been given his first horses, Yundemvanchig rode around quite a bit in the course of his days and he had begun to meet many new people. One of these was a man named Tumuung Hon Bunduisanja, meaning Bunduisanja with a Thousand Sheep. Needless to say he was a very wealthy man. In fact, his wealth was so great that he could not quite manage it by himself. He had been seeking Yundemvanchig and the two met once again later that day.

Banduisanjaa said to Yundemvanchig, “Tomorrow I am going to be making felt with the wool from my sheep. I am seeking help from every hand that is willing. Will you come?” Both men knew that Yundemvanchig had very few obligations. Banduisanjaa was actually a local person and he knew just about everything there was to know about the young man. After all, there wasn’t much to that little black ger of his. Of course, Yundemvanchig agreed to come because, while there is work involved there is also a lot of fun. When Mongolians make felt it turns into a festival of sorts. There would be plenty of food and fun and also many new people to meet.

It was a whole day affair of beating the wool, sprinkling it with water, and riding the rolls of forming felt over the landscape, very skilled work. As the evening came on dinner and the party began. At one point, Banduisanjaa stood up and said, “You see Yundemvanchig here? He has so graciously worked over my felt all day long. Before this evening some of you may have known his ger, some of you maybe not. But after today, you will all be intimately familiar with it because I am going to give him some of this fine, new felt we made to cover it over. Thank you, Yundemvanchig. Your ger will shine white across the steppe.” And Yundemvanchig, stunned but at the same time inwardly knowing stood up after Banduisanjaa and delivered his thanks and praises. His speech was poetic and his vocabulary so learned, like that of an educated lama. The young man didn’t notice, it slid naturally from his mouth, but if he were to think very hard about it he would realize that several of the words he used had never been uttered within his hearing. Strange. The people certainly thought so. Those who were

most familiar with the young man really began to wonder about all these sudden changes. Just within the last few weeks he was a lonely, isolated, poor young man. Then somehow he acquired two horses, he began visiting, there were rumors that he was courting a young woman to the east, just tonight he had been given very valuable, heavy felt for his ger, and the poetics of his speech were shocking.

Among those who were most intrigued were two local lamas, Bor and Tuvden. Tuvden was actually a Tibetan lama. In the peaceful days following the party they visited Yundemvanchig's new ger and asked what was happening to him, why all these changes were occurring. Being religious men, they suspected that there were spirits involved and that Yundemvanchig had unusual communicative powers for a layperson. But to their disappointment, Yundemvanchig wouldn't speak of anything other than coincidence. At this point, the young man honestly did not know what was happening or who was responsible. He thought that he would be laughed at if he said that a rock with a woman's spirit fulfilled his dreams; all he had to do was whisper his desires into her stony body. The rational part of his mind still did hold coincidence responsible so he said to the monks in exasperation, "You know, I don't know, I don't know what's happening. I don't have any kind of energy, any kind of magical powers. I don't know how to explain it." For the time being, the monks had to be satisfied with that response. But they could also derive some clues from his curt answer. The fact that he mentioned energy and magical powers meant that they were two possibilities churning on the young man's mind.

Fortunately for Yundemvanchig's nerves, the monks were not the only two visitors he received in the days following the party. Many people came to admire his beautiful, new felt ger. They all suggested that he have a community party to liven up his new home. At first, he was very resistant, a little irritated, because despite his new felt, he was still a poor man. It was obvious. He said to the people, "Please stop. How can I have a nice party when all I own is a broken pot and a broken plate and no animals to whiten my vessels?" It was true. Usually, Yundemvanchig depended on the hospitality of others for his meals, even his daily milk. Even so, people insisted. They offered to help with everything, the food, the bowls, and all. Yundemvanchig merely had to provide the roof. Eventually he agreed.

With the help of the community he had a very full and special party. The boiled mutton and potatoes were plentiful. A pile of bones, cleaner than you would imagine, built up in the center of the ger. And when stomachs were stuffed and greasy knives tucked away, the airag came out. For hours, songs roared from the belly of the ger and by nighttime the mood had mellowed. For a while, conversation was low. People simply enjoyed each other's presence and energy in the glow of the candle, suspended in the middle of the ger. But then a voice rung out and it said, "In order to bless your new ger, Yundemvanchig, I will give you a nice milk cow." There was a long chain of these generous proclamations and the young man was overwhelmed to the point of silence. But he gathered himself and he said, "Let us have a break from this party. Let us step outside and please our eyes." Sleepy, contented bodies struggled to their feet and stepped through the

doorway into the night. Though it was night, you could still see the landscape and once everyone had gathered, Yundemvanchig swept his hand across the panorama before them, imagining that all the animals promised to him were there now. “Oh what a beautiful scene,” he said, “I can see my corral full of sheep, my valley full of horses, my cows huddled around their calves. What beauty, what happiness.” And after a few moments of silence he said, “Khurai, khurai, I’ll collect that.” And he walked back into the ger. It was a very grand and poetic way of expressing his gratitude to all these people who were being so good to him.

The two lamas, Bor and Tuvden had been at the party. Their curiosity regarding the interesting changes in Yundemvanchig, the changes in his wealth, his thought, his speech, and his behavior would not go away. They did not want to disturb Yundemvanchig’s comfort that night, but they resolved to come and question him again about this chain of events the following day. When they did, the young man’s response was different than the last. He said to them, simply, “Please, come back tomorrow.” They could tell that he was considering something very carefully. Though people were coming over all day, bringing in the animals that they had promised the previous night, Yundemvanchig had to leave. He went up to the rock on the hill and said, “Avgai Eej, respected mother, please help me. Should I tell the lamas the truth? I do not know what to do.” In his dreams that night she came to him and said, “Yes, Yundemvanchig, tell them the truth.”

When the lamas arrived in late morning, he invited them into his ger and said, “Please, sit down, let me make some smoke.” And he set about making a fire

for hot tea. The lamas again wondered at his poetics, but because of the gravity in his voice they knew that they were nearing their discovery. When the tea was ready he took the top and sprinkled it out to the spirits of nature. Then he offered some to the lamas. He said, “Now I will deliver the truth to each of you.” Over tea, he shared with them the story of his fortune. Afterwards the lamas left with an air of business about them.

Early in the morning before sunrise the next day they went up the hill to the site Yundemvanchig described. They sat upon one of the many large rocks strewn over this landscape on a little rise above Yundemvanchig’s mother rock, as he called it. They watched it intensely from their perch. In the golden light of early morning they saw White Tara nearby the rock. Later they saw Yanjinlham, and still later Bujinlham. All three are feminine deities and so the lamas knew that the rock too had a powerful feminine spirit. Like a mother, it listened to Yundemvanchig, took care of him, and provided him with what he needed. Like a mother this rock would do the same for any honest person who came to her with honest wishes.

With the help of Yundemvanchig and the two lamas, Bor and Tuvden, worship of Eej Khad, the Mother Rock, spread throughout the Barag community in central Mongolia, soon reaching other Mongol ethnicities as well. After many years of solitary life on the hill, the spirit of the girl began receiving many, many visitors. Like a mother, she took care of them and used her powers to make their dreams come true.

*Hamb Lam Dashdawaa tells me that Yundemvanchig’s descendents are actually not living very happy lives these days, nor are they wealthy. He believes that this is*

*because they are ignoring Eej Khad. They do not respect her by visiting her and giving her with offerings. Therefore the blessing she had placed on their family is fading.*

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## **The History**

Prior to the twentieth century I did not encounter any historical knowledge of Eej Khad other than the origin stories. When exactly these stories take place is vague. Excepting Dashdawaa's definitive "300 years ago," most of the people I spoke to had no idea when Eej Khad began. It was a "long time ago," they would say. But I got the feeling that a "long time," being a relative describer, had very different meanings depending on the person. In Chunag's case it referred to the "beginning of the world." In Mendsaikhan's it meant more than six generations. Some people seemed to be referring to the last hundred years. If anything, uncertainty was the general rule.

Beginning in the twentieth century, the history becomes more full. It begins with the Barag migration to central Mongolia. Some of my informants (namely those under the influence of Dashdawaa) believe that they discovered Eej Khad. Others say that they learned to worship Eej Khad from the Khalkh people who had already done so for hundreds of years. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa, a big proponent of the former belief, revealed some uncertainty, however, when he mentioned that for three hundred years (a time span that refers to his origin legend) Eej Khad has absorbed the wishes of those who have come to worship her. Three hundred years ago, there were no Barags anywhere near Eej Khad.

Despite these differences we can conclude that Eej Khad was known and worshipped by the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **Socialist Times**

The domination of Russian culture over Mongolia and the subsequent socialist transition was the next big historic landmark for Eej Khad. By that time Eej Khad was certainly well established in the local community, recognized by lamas in the Buddhist faith as well as by the locals. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa says that in 1935, when it became clear to the Buddhist community that religion would soon be repressed, lamas stripped of their titles if not killed, and monasteries destroyed, the local lamas of Eej Khad's area held a ceremony. They inaugurated Eej Khad as the keeper of the belief and the spirit of the people saying, "We will be gone, but you will be here." Because organized religion was too high profile to outlast the purges they trusted in Eej Khad to go unnoticed by the Party authorities and to continue to help the people in secret.

But there are accounts of Party resistance to Eej Khad. The earliest incident was explained by Shaman Byambadorj. In the past, when old shamans died, their souls were put into rocks (that is why shamans talk to rocks; they are talking to the souls of past shamans). In Eej Khad's history, the souls of many shamans were put into her as well. During the time of the socialist transition, when Buddhism was being repressed, the Party also found out about this shamanic practice. Byambadorj says that you used to be able to distinguish a rock that contained a soul because it took on a human form. The Party systematically beheaded all such rocks, including Eej Khad, and that is why there are no rocks like this left in Mongolia today.

It is also one way to explain why Eej Khad does not have an original head that is contiguous with her stone body. The origin stories of Mendsaikhan and Dashdawaa both

explain the absence of a head in a different way. From the very beginning of Eej Khad the head was taken away by the lord and husband. Therefore she never had a head as long as people have worshipped her. Byambadorj believes that she did have one, but it was knocked off in relatively recent times, the 1930's.

During the socialist period of Mongolia's history, worship of Eej Khad was very secretive. Nobody lived near Eej Khad for fear of being associated with her and people would only go to worship at night for fear of being seen. Because of the hidden nature of these practices, Eej Khad remained a local object of worship for much of the twentieth century. The 1970's stand out in people's minds as a period when Eej Khad began to receive public attention. Articles slandering Eej Khad began to appear in the newspaper to counteract the people's draw to it. Chunag and his wife told me that the people they knew would simply cut the picture out from the bad article and hang it up after burning the rest. They would worship the picture since it was too dangerous to go to the actual site.

The Sergelen Soum Governor Mendsaikhan extends this period of the wider popularization of Eej Khad back into the 1960's and believes that it is due to the availability of automobiles in Mongolia. People with cars were able to drive from further away to visit, making what was once a more difficult trip into something easier. But he warned that you still had to be careful. Sometimes the Party had people up on a distant hill with binoculars, recording the license plates of the people who came to worship. They would report to the government and the next day you couldn't work.

However secretive the people tried to be, the practices and beliefs surrounding Eej Khad were discovered by the Party. There are numerous stories told about local Party governors and other people who disrespected Eej Khad or attempted to destroy her. Many of them are repeated by several sources. According to Mendsaikhan, one governor would take the offerings from Eej Khad and tried to destroy her. She punished him by killing his

wife and sons. Another governor took the offerings from Eej Khad and fed the candy to his young children. Ten years later all three sons died. The middle-aged local husband and wife, Munkhur and Dashtsermaa, say that another governor came to stop the worship and on his way back he fell from his horse and went crazy. Nyamlkhagva says that a group of people came here and tried to break down Eej Khad, pulling it with a car. They couldn't do it and gave up. On their way back home the car crashed and they all died. There are also several versions of a story where the Soum governor hired a tractor to try and pull down the rock. They failed and the main actors or their families were punished in all cases. Humphrey retells a version of this story in her article (1993).

Eej Khad did not just punish Party members, but anyone who disrespected her. There are a couple versions of a story about a boy who came to Eej Khad and smeared her body with cow excrement, mocking her power. That night the boy got very sick, with blotches all over his body. The family offered one of their animals to Eej Khad in apology and the boy quickly recovered. They went to the rock and cleaned her stone body. In another version, Eej Khad killed the boy outright, but the family still had to make apologies. This latter version was passed down through Mendsaikhan's family, perhaps as a way of instilling a respectful fear of Eej Khad in them from an early age.

Chunag's son, Byambasaikhan, told the story of a family that they knew. This family was fairly wealthy but started taking the offerings from Eej Khad anyway. They would use the silks for cleaning rags and to tie around the necks of their calves. They would take the vodka, selling some and keeping the rest to drink. Many wealthy guests came to help them out on a regular basis. This behavior did not go very long unpunished. Suddenly, the son hanged himself (Dagwaandseren says that people who do wrong to Eej Khad often die by self-hanging). All the vodka-drinking guests began to act strange. They would steal horses and soon they all went to prison. Their lives fell apart.

Many of my informants told me about people they knew who took offerings from Eej Khad. In some cases these were hungry children, out far from home looking after the family's herds. Most of these children repented by offering one of their family's animals in sacrifice. That night, the animal would die by the power of Eej Khad; they were never brought to the actual site in sacrifice. In other cases, these were men who took some of Eej Khad's vodka. One man quickly repented and offered a red lamb from his herd. He did not know that it was his little son's favorite lamb and that evening it jumped once in the air and came down to the ground dead.

1970 was a very important year in Eej Khad's history. Though there are some descending opinions, most agree that around this time Eej Khad was given a head by one of her worshippers. The man placed a round rock in the space between her shoulders. This rock crowned her woman-like appearance. Humphrey heard from some Mongolians that this was the first episode in the history of Eej Khad's worship (1996), but the memories of several local people I talked to reveal a the rich history, which we have already covered, preceding this event. Another discrepancy lies in Humphrey's belief that this head was part of the original stone. My sources tell me that it was a different stone, never naturally attached to Eej Khad.

Chunag remembers when the head was placed. He also remembers an incident involving the newly dedicated head. That year he was working as a driver for the soum governor and a party of men who were out to take a new census of the soum's livestock. It had been a very bad winter and many animals had died. They decided to stop at Eej Khad in the course of their rounds. They began to circle her and on the third time one of the men got very angry. Maybe the governor at that time was immune to the Party ideology, but this man was not. He began to yell, "Why are we worshipping you! You aren't real!" And he knocked down her head, tore off her ponytail, and kicked her offerings all over. Chunag held him back, saying, "What are you doing? You don't have

to be here if you don't want to believe it. Go to the car!" The man left to wait in the car while the others did their worship. Chunag set everything up again, placing the head on her shoulders and rearranging the offerings. He stroked her forehead three times, an honored way of showing his love. Afterwards they continued on their course.

From this day on Chunag believes that his life has become very nice by the power of Eej Khad. But the opposite could be said for the man who disrespected her. Chunag says that three days later this man was riding to a shagai kharvak game (an old Mongolian game where you flick ankle bones into the air at a target). On the way he fell from his horse and his brain began to leak from his ear. He was hospitalized for a month, but he became stupid. His wife and son left him and none of his old friends wanted to see him. He lived in isolation for two years until he died. Before this incident he was a rich man with a very nice life, says Chunag.

During this time there are many stories not just of Eej Khad's wrathful power, but of her good deeds as well. Many of the most impressive stories about the power of Eej Khad take place in the years following the transition to Socialism. The exact years are often unknown. Nyamlkhagva told the story of a young man from the area who was forced to serve in the army for a period of five years. He was single and so when he left there would be no one there to care for his herds. He went to Eej Khad and asked her to look after them. In the five years he was gone the animals stayed in a single valley and never strayed. There are many wolves in this area, but they remained safe. They had even multiplied by the time that this man returned. For much of her history, Eej Khad has been famous for taking care of the animals of herders. Even today many people go to Eej Khad for help if they have lost their animals, in particular horses. It may have been a couple months since they were last seen, but after visiting Eej Khad they are very quickly found, says Byambasaikhan. He has done it many times.

## **1990 to the Present**

When the democratic transition began in 1990 and the restrictions on religion were lifted, Eej Khad saw a dramatic increase in popularity. There was nothing to fear. People from all over, not just locals, could come to visit her at any time of day. Brick tea, a valuable commodity during socialist times, was another popular offering. By this time, a wall of brick tea was built up, at least a couple meters high, surrounding Eej Khad. There was also trash collecting in a massive quantity in the area around Eej Khad, discarded bottles, wrappers, and bags, all waste from the more commercial offerings that people started to bring were supposedly obscuring Eej Khad from view. Dagwaandseren says that trash became a huge problem around Eej Khad.

The volume of people that began visiting also scared away the wildlife. Byambasaikhan, Chunag's 26-year-old son, says that when he was young there used to be wild Argali sheep and wild goats on Avdar Uul. Now they are all gone. Dagwaandseren says that the mountain also used to be home to many marmots. But he never could get one with his bullet; they acted funny (Maybe this is a good thing for him too because Shaman Byambadorj says that every animal living near Eej Khad is her animal and should never be harmed).

A culture of homeless and unemployed people living among the rocks around Eej Khad also developed. They would eat from Eej Khad's offerings as well as drink her vodka. Maybe that is why they were not doing well, speculates Dashdawaa.

In 1995 Eej Khad's first "owner" began to take action around the site. His name was Baadai, a man from Bayankhungor, not a local. He was the brother of the wife of current owner Hamb Lam Dashdawaa. They bought land amounting to about five square kilometers around the site and also began restoring a small monastery about four kilometers distant from the site that they dedicated to Eej Khad and planned to surround with 108 new stupas. Dashdawaa, even though he was not the owner at this time, was

heavily involved in the project. The first owner, Baadai, did not live long. Mendsaikhan believes that this is because, although he was doing some good things like building the stupas, he was also doing bad things. Eej Khad's judgment was clear. He must have been using some of the offering money in his personal life, he says. When Baadai died his son took over, but he didn't last long either. His wife became very ill and fearing Eej Khad's power, he fled from the project.

Dashdawaa was next in line to inherit the site and began working it in his own way. He says that at first he was not sure whether or not it was right to take away the trash surrounding Eej Khad. Perhaps she would be angry, considering it a theft. But in the end he decided that it was a good thing. Dashdawaa says that in 1996 the trash was halfway up the rocks and that it took thirty large trucks to haul it all away. This was just the beginning of some very big changes that were to take place under his direction.

Dashdawaa is not a local man, he is from Arkhangai, and there is a serious controversy between him and the local people regarding his actions at the site. Dashdawaa is very conscious of this feud and he believes that a woman who owns a little shack selling food (*horhog*-boiled mutton, *buutz*-large steamed dumplings, and *huushuur*-flat fried dumplings) and offering stuffs to the visitors is the zealous leader of the local resistance against him. When his wire fence gets clipped or anything else on the site gets vandalized, he blames her. The locals consider both individuals a little eccentric; there are stories of fistfights between the two. You cannot entirely trust what either one says about the other.

However the Horhog Lady, in general, reflects the opinion of most people that I spoke to. She believes that Eej Khad is angry with the Hamb Lam. It began with his cleanup project around her. She says that in the process he lit the former wall of brick tea on fire. Inside it there were many happy mice, taking shelter near the plentiful supply of

Eej Khad's generous offerings. They perished in the blaze. It is as if Dashdawaa murdered hundreds of Eej Khad's children, she said.

In 1997, Hamb Lam Dashdawaa glued the head onto Eej Khad's body to keep it from tumbling down, which it did quite often. He also scratched a face onto the round rock, still the original head that was placed in 1970. That same year, in a much more controversial act, he built a fence and a large roofed structure around Eej Khad, resembling the shape of a ger. At this time the Twin Springs, which give the area around Eej Khad its name, dried up and so did the green grasses that grew in the cup of the mountain. The Horhog Lady says that before the Hamb Lam came this was a beautiful place, with green grasses, the springs, and candy and biscuits everywhere. People could just come, park anywhere, and do what they wanted. It was Eej Khad's anger with the Hamb Lam's buildings that caused this place to become ugly. Many people I talked to agree with this assessment, but Byambasaikhan also admits that there may be some ecological causes to blame as well.

The local people fought the construction of a building around Eej Khad passionately. Chunag says that he went to Dashdawaa and bereted him. Eej Khad is a natural object. She must be out in Nature to feel the sun, the wind, the rain, and the snow. Nobody liked the fence, but to have a roof over top of Eej Khad was too much. In the prologue to shaman Byambadorj's poem he talks about how wrong this is. Mendsaikhan says that he too went to Dashdawaa to protest the structure. Three years ago, Dashdawaa finally took the roofed structure down. There was a very bad drought that year and the day that the structure came down it rained heavily for hours by the grace of Eej Khad.

But that structure did not go long without replacement. Dashdawaa built the thick circular brick wall that is still present around Eej Khad today. It is open to the sky, but the wall is so tall that you can barely see the surrounding mountains. The ground around Eej Khad is covered with a floor of concrete. Though this is an improvement from the roofed

structure, most worshippers still do not like it. It should be open to Nature, they say. The shaman Byambadorj does not hold his ceremony directly around Eej Khad, but rather at the ovoo outside, for this reason.

Nyamkhagva, Dashdawaa's driver, can sympathize with both sides of the issue. He thinks that perhaps the walls and fence help to remind people that they shouldn't just throw their trash around. It shows that people are working at and maintaining this site and it should be treated accordingly. Even so, dealing with trash, especially on Saturday and Sunday evenings, is a big part of their job. Some people like Chunag, however, don't think that the site should have an owner at all. He remembers when offerings were simple. People splashed milk as an offering to the spirits and they didn't leave any waste behind.

One of the biggest controversies over Dashdawaa as an owner is what he does with the offerings. His staff monopolizes the site, collecting all the offerings at the end of each day. Typically, these offerings include candies and biscuits, vodka, milk, money, and khadags. But there are also some special things. Once a silver and gold smith came and offered some of his pieces to Eej Khad. You can also find very beautiful cuts of silk. Dashdawaa says that he plans to open an exhibit with some of the more unique offerings that have been given over the years. There will be a historical retrospective on vodka bottles, for example. A lot of the offerings, like the silks, are enshrined in the stupas he is constructing at the monastery. He says that he donates a lot of the food to charities.

The offering that people talk about the most is money, of course. It can amount to quite a lot in the course of a day. It is not uncommon to see a few twenty-thousand *tugrug* notes, the Mongolian currency, hanging from the prayer beads around her neck. Worshippers often slip notes beneath her del as well. Some of the money goes towards paying his employees, of course, but the rest is hotly disputed. Dashdawaa says that he pays taxes to the Sergelen Soum government, pays for ten poor children in the soum to

go to school, helps locals with funeral costs when someone dies, as well as puts money towards the construction of the stupas at his monastery. Some locals believe that it all goes into his personal pocket and that he is getting rich. Chunag's family believes that the root of the feud between the Horhog Lady and Dashdawaa is simply a selfish fight over who gets the offerings, him or her. Sergelen Soum Governor Mendsaikhan says that Dashdawaa and the soum are not on the best of terms because he doesn't always contribute his part. But Byambasaikhan, Chunag's son, says that if he is working at the site he does deserve some of the money. He and Mendsaikhan believe that the stupas are a good way to put the money to use. In response, Chunag notes skeptically that Dashdawaa is now saying that the money for the stupas should come from other, outside sources. So where is the money from Eej Khad going?

The truth is hard to discern, but most agree that Dashdawaa must be doing some things right. Otherwise he would not be alive. But the fact that he is doing some things wrong is just as evident to them. Since taking ownership of Eej Khad, two of his gers have burnt down and two of his cars have caught on fire and been destroyed. The Horhog Lady connects these incidents to the very beginning, when Dashdawaa burnt down the mice home of brick tea. She also says that every year one or two members of Dashdawaa's family die as a punishment from Eej Khad. So why does he continue to exert ownership over the site? It is his only source of income, the way he makes his living, they say.

I was warned by the Horhog lady not to accept Dashdawaa's food and hospitality. Local people never do. It all comes from the offerings to Eej Khad. It was meant for the spirits, not for mortal mouths. It is bad for a person to eat those things... Too late. He had been hosting me in his home during my work hours for two days by then. I had eaten plenty of his biscuits, sampled his candy, and drank his milk tea and vodka.

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## Measuring Her Power

A few of my sources believe that the power of Eej Khad is faded in the modern day. Some people, including Dashtsermaa, say that they get this sense because many of the most impressive stories of Eej Khad's power take place a long time ago. You don't see these kinds of things today. None of them know exactly why the power might be fading. But there is some speculation.

Mendsaikhan believes that Eej Khad was very powerful in Socialist times because she was responding to a very difficult period for the spirits and their believers. If you did just a little thing wrong at that time, she would kill you. He believes that this power began to fade after 1990, the time of the democratic transition of the Mongolian State. This same informant offered another explanation. Perhaps the spirit of Eej Khad is calming down; her anger is fading since it has been so long since she was wronged (referring both to the action taken by socialist authorities and to his version of the origin legend). Some informants, however, responded without hesitation that the power of Eej Khad is the same as ever. Dagwaandseren is one of those.

There are still stories about Eej Khad's impressive power that occur in more contemporary times. In another recent story about the theft of Eej Khad's vodka, the drunken man forgot what he had done and a few days later he found his one powerful breeding goat lying dead. He suddenly remembered the vodka and from that day on was afraid of Eej Khad and vodka both. Nyamlkhagva told me this story. The man lives in the area of Eej Khad. Chunag knows a man from

Delgerkhaan Soum, Khentii Aimag who moved near to Eej Khad. He was very poor, but after he began worshipping Eej Khad his life began to improve. Now he is very rich, owning over a thousand horses, and his sons are all doing well. He also knows a forty-two year old woman who had been trying to have children for many years. She moved to Eej Khad and had her first child recently. Everybody says that when elections are approaching, Eej Khad is swarming with politicians asking for a successful end to their campaign.

Many of the people I talked to have recent personal stories that point to Eej Khad's enduring power. I met a young father in his late twenties at the site of Eej Khad. He was taking shelter behind one of the many large rocks and proudly holding his seven-month-old baby girl, bundled up in a thick pink suit against the powerful North Wind. Doctors had told him that for biological reasons it was impossible for his wife to have a baby. But they came to Eej Khad, prayed, and here she is: a beautiful, healthy, baby girl. He said that he visits Eej Khad every year, and every year his wishes come true. Byambasaikhan says that in 2000 he was out on the steppe caring for his horses when he heard of a wrestling tournament in his hometown. He came back only three days before the tournament. He didn't have time for any training but he asked Eej Khad for help and he won the tournament.

Eej Khad will still defend herself too, he warned. Not too long ago Byambasaikhan took two friends to Eej Khad to teach them about her. One of his friends was a little drunk already and took some of her vodka while they were there. He didn't say anything at the time, but when they were driving away from

the site, just near the monastery, their car burst into flames. Luckily, they all escaped. Byambasaikhan says that there are two reasons why this happened. It was disrespectful to visit Eej Khad when drunk and, of course, you should never take her offerings.

These days Eej Khad is, without doubt, more popular than she has ever been. Not only are there more Mongolians coming to visit her. There are also foreigners. Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Inner Mongolian, and Korean visitors are relatively common. Dashdawaa's wife said proudly (although it is certainly an exaggeration) that people from every country in the world come to Eej Khad. Mendsaikhan also believes that Eej Khad is becoming world famous. Chunag and Nyamlkhagva remember around four or five years ago when American actress Julia Roberts came to Eej Khad. She let herself believe in the power of Eej Khad, prayed for a baby, and sure enough she had one.

High profile cases and common cases all point to one thing: People believe. If people didn't believe they wouldn't be coming, and returning again. If they didn't believe they wouldn't tell their friends about her and the numbers of visitors wouldn't increase and diversify with every year. Mendsaikhan wants to make a documentary about Eej Khad so that he can teach the world about her. People from distant countries will learn about her from my movie, they will come, and they will be helped, he says. For many, Eej Khad is just as powerful as ever, and her reach is expanding wider still.

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## **Conclusion: Eej Khad and an Attitude Towards Nature**

This study of Eej Khad may be applied to a larger study of Mongolian folk religion, the beliefs that impregnate Mongolian culture regardless of outside forces. Folk religion might be defined as a spiritual belief that has been held for so long that it has become neutral, it is held as fact and not belief and therefore it cannot be in conflict with any other religion. That is why all religions including Buddhists and Shamans, even Muslims and Christians, can come to Eej Khad. Folk religion exists underneath and in spite of organized religion. It characterizes a certain people, making them unique. When I asked a visitor, a young man in his thirties, what religion Eej Khad related to he answered confidently, “There is no religion, no god-connection here. This is passed down from ancient times.” What is passed down from ancient times? It is a belief in the power of Nature and the spirits that give it life.

Dashdawaa says that the reason Eej Khad does not connect to any religion is because she is from Nature. What the belief in Eej Khad amounts to in essence is really a belief in Nature as a whole. She is inextricably linked to the land, the waters, and the heavens. That is where her power comes from. In the origin legends of Eej Khad, it was her intimate connection to her homeland and the acceptance of her soul by the spirits of that land that created her. The worship of Eej Khad is the worship of Nature.

This respect for Nature grew out of dependency on nature. Mongolian herders, sparsely populating a vast open steppe, were at Nature’s mercy for much

of their history, and many still are. A vast system of beliefs developed because of this dependency. These include the offerings that surround Eej Khad and the offerings that are made to the spirits from the top of the tea every morning.

In Mongolian there is a phrase: *Ekh Gazar, Etseg Tengir* meaning Mother Earth, Father Sky. According to Chunag, Mother and Nature are in fact one thing. Eej Khad takes care of you. She is a Mother. She is Nature. Chunag joked that the main lesson I would take from my research, the main thing I would say when Americans asked me about Eej Khad, is that Mongolians believe in Nature more than they believe in their own families. They care about a rock more than they care about their own mothers. But actually, he said, people and Nature are all linked. In the entire world there is only one Nature and one People, he said. Everyone has to believe and love Nature. He and Dashdawaa both voiced their belief that all lands have their own spirits-masters, and that the people are dependent on them whether they know it or not.

Both Chunag and Dashdawaa were curious about the existence of places like Eej Khad in America. There must be some, they said. Every land has its spirit masters, after all. It is one Nature, the world over. Dashdawaa told me that if he comes to America, he will learn about the spirits masters there and that he will certainly respect them. If people tell me that I shouldn't go to that mountain there, I will not go, he says. You do not own nature; you live under it. This study is just a glimpse into the worldview of one culture, but it demonstrates the essential nature of a worldview. The applicability of Mongolian beliefs do not stop end

with Mongolian borders or with Mongolian people. Mongolian beliefs animate a global landscape.

That being said, generalizations can never be trusted. They are only made for the sake of convenience. The conflict at Eej Khad over construction around the site points to a very potent issue that is raging in all areas of Mongolia. The building of a fence and wall around Eej Khad relates to a larger process in Mongolia and the world as a whole: A distancing from nature, an attempt to own her rather than live under her. It is capitalism. It is business. Because there is conflict at all is evidence that many Mongolians still have a belief in the autonomy of Nature. Locals fondly remember the days when Eej Khad stood naked: no walls, no clothing, simply natural. This is the way it should be, they say confidently. Even some non-locals and newcomers I spoke to voiced a feeling that there is something not-quite-right about the wall surrounding Eej Khad. For many Mongolians, this understanding of Nature is simply a part of their identity. They do not need to be told.

But the fact that there is conflict is a simultaneous proof that not all Mongolians continue to feel this way. While talking to Chunag, he reminisced about a time when all people, even young people, would never move rocks or take them away from their rightful spot. There was a much greater respect for Nature that is now being lost. Today there is mining everywhere and the land is torn apart, he said. Chunag lamented the mining ventures of Mongolians but even worse, he predicted that there would soon be foreigners here too to mine out his land. He was shocked to learn that it was already happening. What we are

witnessing in Mongolia is the interface of two worldviews. They may be embodied in one site; they might be embodied in one person. Hamb Lam Dashdawaa is the instigator of all these controversial changes around Eej Khad and he has even more plans to come. He wants to build a tourist center and conduct tours in the region of the site. This is business. This is money. But Dashdawaa was also one of the people I met who spoke most passionately about Eej Khad's relation to Nature and the power of Nature as a whole. All over Mongolia the question is: What values will be held dearest? What compromises will be made?

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Throughout the course of this paper I have also drawn on mini-interviews that have no formal recording or translation. For example, I talked with the Hamb Lam's cook, the Horhog Lady, Chunag's wife, daughter, and older son. I also talked with many people worshipping at the site. I do not have the names or information of any of these individuals.