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Spirituality and Conservation in Tujiin Nars

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Spirituality and Conservation in Tujiin Nars

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Abstract

For centuries, Mongolians have relied heavily on the land for their survival. In Selenge aimag, the surrounding Tujiin Nars forest is an integral part of their lives. An area with many uses, it was once so heavily deforested that the majority of the area lost its ecological function. Now, these impacts are being reversed by dedicated government workers, community groups, and regular citizens. The people of this area believe that they are intimately connected with the forest, and that spirits reside within the trees and the land itself. As such, they stake importance in treating the land with respect. This spiritual environment has constructed a moral philosophy in this community, shaping the way in which they relate to and use the land. This paper discusses the formulation of this morality, and how daily practices either compliment or counter the spiritual beliefs of this area.

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Relevant Terms

Aimag: A province or region

Soum: A town or village

Nature Spirits: The masters or owners of land

Eej Mod: Mongolian for “Mother Tree”

Ovoo: A circular rock formation used for spiritual practices

Ger: A portable felt housing structure

Introduction

One of the biggest issues in Mongolia today is the balance between development and conservation. The economy has become increasingly important to development. At the same time, the environment, which Mongolians have depended on for centuries, is being threatened by these economic activities such as mining and logging. It is clear that citizens of Mongolia are still interested in conservation, but I wanted to know what motivated them individually to conserve. Specifically, I wanted to see if there were any religious or spiritual motivations for conservation. In order for people to follow policies and make changes in their lives, they need to be internally motivated. Understanding what their main values are can help craft policies and projects that are more effective. I also wanted to investigate what balance between conservation and development they thought was best.

The Tujiin Nars forest has had an interesting history, as it went through massive deforestation followed by massive reforestation efforts. As such, it is an excellent example of how a natural area can be decimated by development, and how it can be restored by the same people. It is also the home to *Eej Mod*, which is a spiritual site visited by people around the country and believed to be a spiritual center and connection to nature spirits. I chose this region because the proximity to the forest could create a more prevalent spiritual climate, and citizens here would have a developed view of conservation and restoration, since they have witnessed the change of the forest overtime.

Literary framework

Religion and Spirituality

Religion has been a controversial topic in Mongolia for the past century. During the socialist regime, the government attempted to purge the country of all religious practices and symbols that conflicted with their greater mission and were associated with previous state structures, mainly those that were connected to Buddhism (Hangartner 2007). During this time, lamas were persecuted, monasteries were destroyed, and Buddhist practices and figures were banned. At the same time, Shamanism and the belief in Tengger (the eternal blue sky), was pushed as the indigenous religion and part of traditional Mongolian culture (Hangartner 2007). Shamans held an exalted position in Mongolian society, something that has endured into the new democracy (Hermann 2017). Now, Buddhism has begun to be advertised as Mongolia's religion once again.

Over time, religious ceremonies and figured have been used as political tools in Mongolia (Sneath 2014). The most prominent example of this is the worship of *ovoos*, circular rock formations where people go to worship deities and nature spirits. These structures are places where the master of the land can be summoned and interacted with (Lindskog 2016). They are also believed to be connected to shamans, and were worshipped before Buddhism became popular in the country. Before the 1921 revolution, these ceremonies were the center of spiritual life. During the socialist time, while religious and spiritual symbols were being destroyed, *ovoos* survived around the country and can be found on mountain peaks, in passes, and by water formations (Lindskog 2016). Now, these ceremonies are some of the most well-attended rituals around the country.

Shamans are also intimately connected with the natural world. They do not just perform ceremonies for individuals and their success, but connect with nature spirits in order to improve regional weather conditions. In one such ceremony, a shamaness was called to “satisfy local spirits and bring rain and better weather to the local environment.” Shamans believe that there is a spirit associated with each landscape feature, and those spirits must be connected with in order to change an undesirable pattern (Sneath 2014).

Nature Spirits and the Worship of Land

Many Mongolians believe in the existence of nature spirits, also known as the masters of the land. These spirits are present everywhere in nature and are connected to specific aspects and phenomena of nature. For each natural being, there is a spirit connected to it. These spirits also have power over natural occurrences, such as floods and droughts (Buryat Mongol 2018).

Land is sacred to Mongolians. This is a belief that has endured throughout centuries, beginning with traditional nomadic groups and continuing throughout regimes, including the socialist period. As Sneath (2014) wrote, “in both the Soviet and post- Soviet periods, the ‘homeland’ was elevated to the point of becoming a sacred principle... images and narratives of Mongolia as blessed with a beautiful natural landscape constituted a central feature of national pride. The importance of ‘roots’ in local homelands is a central theme in Mongolian public life.” Even while other forms of religion and spirituality were banned, the worship of the land and relationships with spirits have consistently been an integral part of Mongolian life (Linkstog 2016).

The perceived connection between humans and nature has constructed the morality regarding the treatment of nature. However, there is still a discrepancy between this value system

and physical actions. Tujiin Nars, for example, underwent massive deforestation. Brunn and Kalland (1995) argue that the presence of nature spirits does not protect nature from destruction, especially when the state's needs necessitate the use of natural resources. If this is the case, they continue, rituals can be done to move the spirits somewhere else, freeing up the land for use. This would relieve the actor of their guilt while still negatively impacting the natural landscape.

Discourse on Poverty

After the collapse of socialism in the 1990's, there was widespread poverty in the country, some of which lingers on today. There were many impacts of this transition, including the increase of logging and mining as a way to make an income. Today, poor communities are blamed for the continuation of these environmental issues. In Ulaanbaatar, for example, the air pollution is explained by the burning of coal heating gers in the ger district (Hernández 2017).

Tujiin Nars History

The Tujiin Nars National Protected Area is an integral part of the natural landscape in Selenge aimag. Today, it covers over 70,000 hectares and is protected by the government, but this has only been achieved after reforestation efforts by the government. In the 1900's, the local government allowed logging in the forest, with the aim of decreasing poverty. This action came at a price, and overtime 70% of the forest lost its ecological function (Department of Tujiin Nars 2018).

Tujiin Nars is now a nationally protected area with the classification of International Union for Conservation of Nature Category II. This designation labels Tujiin Nars as a national park (IUCN, 2018). Local people in this area are allowed to use natural resources for their own subsistence purposes, but not for commercial purposes. Logging and other commercial activities

that are harmful to the environment are prohibited in this area (Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, 1994).

Restoration of the area, led by a government-created department, began in 1971. Currently, the Department of Tujiin Nars is implementing a variety of measures to restore the area, including direct seeding of 2-year-old Scots pine trees, developing a forest nursery with 10 species of woody plants, and partnering with universities to monitor forest ecology and ecological changes. In 2015 alone, they reforested 1,100 hectares (Department of Tujiin Nars, 2018).

These projects have been partly funded by international donors. One of these partners is the Northeast Asian Forest Forum, a non-governmental organization based in South Korea. This organization aims to “restore degraded forest lands, to combat desertification and deforestation, and to promote environmentally sound and sustainable management of forest ecosystems in the region” (Food and Agricultural Organization, 2004). In Tujiin Nars, this organization led three reforestation projects between 2003 and 2005, and recently funded the construction of an observatory tower that overlooks these three sites.

Methods

For my research, I travelled to Sukhbaatar sum in Selenge Aimag. The soum center is near the edge of the Tujiin Nars area, making it an ideal location to interview people about their views of the forest. My methods consisted of semi-structured interviews and recordings, as well as participant observation. During my field work, I conducted interviews through an interpreter and recorded observations of various sites, including *Eej Mod*, the observatory tower, and a local church. The interviewees had a wide range of ages (18-77) and had various jobs. Some

respondents based their career around working with nature (such as working for the government, or managing a personal nursery), while others pursued careers entirely unrelated. Most interviewees lived within the soum center, while others lived in the nearby herder town. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, all names have been changed to common Mongolian names, shown in Appendix I.

The largest limitation of this study was conducting the interviews through a translator. While three of the participants wished to be interviewed in English, the majority spoke through a translator. As such, some of their finer points could have been lost in translation. Additionally, due to time and resource constraints, the scope of this study was limited to 15 interviewees, which cannot provide a complete view of this area's beliefs and practices.

Ethics

All participants read and signed an informed consent form (translated into Mongolian) before each interview began. This form included the nature of the research, the ways in which their privacy would be protected, and what this information would be used for. If they gave permission, the interview was audio recorded.

Because all of the interviewees were legally adults and none belonged to a vulnerable population group, there were no major ethical concerns regarding the interviews. They were informed prior to the interview that they didn't have to answer any questions they were not comfortable with, and were not asked to provide any deeply personal information. Prior to the start of the field work, the proposal was submitted to a Local Review Board in order to screen for any potential ethical concerns.

Results

Because of the limited scope of this study, these results do not necessarily reflect the overall beliefs and practices of Selenge aimag as a whole. However, because the interviewees came from such different backgrounds, it provides a window into the spiritual, practical, and social environments of this area. Ages are included when interviewees are mentioned by pseudonym. Because the controversial history of this forest happened somewhat recently, the ages of the respondents is an important tool to understand what parts of this history they have experienced firsthand. The interviewees' personal insight of the area as a whole can also provide a deeper understanding of the area's climate surrounding religion, spirituality, and conservation practices, beyond the participants alone.

Religion in the Area

In Selenge aimag today, religious practices are prevalent. A common response to the frequency of Buddhism in Selenge province was that all Mongolians are Buddhist, because Buddhism is this country's religion. Everyone who had been Buddhist their whole lives said this, but this was even the response from somebody who didn't identify as Buddhist. Only six of the 15 people interviewed said they believe in Buddhism. Some respondents said that Buddhism is becoming more popular. Ergil, a 57 year old security guard, surmised that more people are comfortable declaring they're Buddhist now that the Buddhism is allowed and encouraged by the government.

Many of the interviewees noted that the religious climate in Selenge is changing. The biggest change is the new variety in religious beliefs. Tuya, 54, Naraa, 37, and Batbayar, 29, all said that Buddhism isn't the only religion in the area anymore and some people are changing

their religion. Tsetseg, 30, is a Christian in the area and is a member of one of the 5 churches in Sukhbaatar soum. Their church holds service every week, and can hold about 30 people. Most of the congregation are widowed women with children, and there are very few men who regularly attend. Besides Sunday service, they also hold weekly prayer meetings, sometimes with other local congregations. The people in the congregation, Tsetseg included, firmly believe in God and Christianity and renounce some traditional Mongolian spiritual practices.

During an observed church service, the woman preaching the sermon one Sunday called on her congregation to not be afraid to tell their non-Christian friends that their beliefs and rituals, including the worship of *Eej Mod*, are empty and they would be better off with Christianity. This was a view that Tsetseg shared, as well. She stated that worshiping the mother tree may give answers, but will not provide any real help, and that superstitions surrounding nature in these practices breed fear, pride and selfishness. Instead, she continued, people should seek help from their family and friends and invest more in their community.

Spirituality in the Area

Shamanism can be an important aspect of some families in Selenge. Three respondents only started believing in the work of shamans when a relative became a shaman. Sukhbaatar, a 41 year old bank security guard, said that shamans are connected to every family in some way, and can trace back many generations. He continued to say that Mongolians should continue to practice these traditions and pass them on to their children. His father was a shaman, but his family stopped practicing once his father passed. Instead of appointing a new family shaman, they built a shelter for his shaman items near a sacred mountain.

Shamanism was cited by Tomor, 64, as a necessary calming presence for everyone, especially young people. People go to shamans to improve their health and career success and their families. Sarnai, 35, said that shamanism is the biggest Mongolian superstition, but noted that these superstitions were true. Perceived changes in shamanism overtime were different throughout the interviews. Some (Narangerel, 18, and Sarnai, 35, for example) said that it was more popular, while others (Naraa, 37) said that it was less popular now than it was. Tsetseg, 30, said that the red shamans, the type that are connected with evil spirits, are becoming more common. Only four respondents declared that they believed in the work of shamans.

Belief in Nature Spirits

Of the fifteen interviewees, 11 people believe in nature spirits. Of those who don't, one is a Christian who said that, while she doesn't put her faith in them, she accepts that they exist. Tomor, 64, said that spirits aren't important, but life is important. Instead of praying to nature spirits, he prays to the forest as a whole. Since everything in nature is alive, it is important to treat it with respect. Four respondents who believe in nature spirits do not believe in any religion or shamanism.

The common feeling was that people depend on nature spirits, and without them humans would be destroyed. Narangerel, 18 and Batbayar, 29, said that landowners are present in every piece of land, and it is important to show them respect by prayer and offerings of candy and food before visiting or travelling through an area. Tuya, 54, said that people should think about nature spirits before even visiting, by consulting the Buddhist calendar to decide which day is best to visit an area.

Most of the interviewees accepted that people and nature are intimately connected. As such, actions that negatively impact nature will have consequences, and the way you affect the forest will affect the quality of your life. One of the most important interactions mentioned was the treatment of trees in the forest. Batbayar, 29, said that if you cut down a tree, your life would be cut short. Conversely, the more trees you plant, the longer your life will be. Baatar, 77, said that, growing up, they believed that if you cut down trees, your parents will die. Both Tsetseg, 30, and Bilge, 46, said that breaking tree branches would anger the nature spirits and, if you make the spirits mad, you will not have a peaceful life. Tomor, 64, said that the larch tree is sacred, and it is the worst to cut down, saying that, even if you need wood to heat your ger, you should never cut down. Larch wood, however, is perfect for making instruments, so it's okay to use the wood for this purpose, as long as you pray and ask the spirits for permission first. If you don't ask for permission, he said, "you won't have anything," meaning that you would lose your job and money.

Some respondents gave examples that proved their point. Narangerel, 18, talked about workers of a small company who cut down trees in the forest for business, whose relatives died shortly after. Ergil, 57, said he knew multiple people who, after they cut trees in the forest, broke their legs and needed surgery. Baatar, 77, said that weather patterns are the only proof you need, and that natural disasters, such as floods and tsunamis, show the anger of the nature spirits for how the environment is being treated by humans.

Eej Mod

Eej Mod, the mother tree, is an important spiritual symbol and connection to nature and the spiritual world. People from the surrounding area, as well as groups from across the country,

visit this tree to worship, make offerings, and make wishes. Most of the people visiting the tree came with their families, sometimes with as many as three generations. The common reasons for visiting the tree are to make wishes, but most people also go before travelling a long ways, for lunar New Year, and at snow melt during the start of spring.

Most interviewees said they visit *Eej Mod* between one and four times each year, and each visit is a special occasion, especially if they come from far away. When visiting, people give offerings consisting of milk, vodka, rice, and crackers. There is also a stand to burn juniper. These gifts all have a different symbolic importance. Milk was important, visitors said, because it is what you eat from your mother at the beginning of your life, and the mother tree was the beginning of the forest. Rice was symbolic because it is an the nourishment of your life, and *Eej Mod* is the nourishment of your soul. Vodka is a common gift of respect throughout Mongolia. Some of these gifts were placed on a table, while other gifts, usually rice and milk, were tossed into the air and on the ground. One family took turns doing a milk offering, each person turning towards the sun with their eyes closed, their left hand holding a bowl of milk to their face, and their right arm outstretched, doing a silent prayer. After a minute, they tossed the milk into the air, and repeated this process three times.

After giving offerings, visitors prayed in two main locations. The first was to a stand of scarves, which is said to be the site of the tree's stump. At this location, people whispered into the scarves their wishes, usually for the health and success of themselves and their family. The second was inside a shelter built specifically for prayers, which had two prayers visitors could recite. These prayers worshipped the tree and recognized its power while also acknowledging the importance of other aspects of nature, such as mountains and rivers. Visitors also said that they

never use “I” or “me” when praying, but always “we” and “us.” This is all because people are connected to each other, just as they are connected to nature.

There is now another tree close by that people pray to whenever they visit *Eej Mod*. It goes by multiple names, including “Uncle Tree” and “Wishing Tree.” Some visitors said that this second tree was specifically for the health and wellbeing of children. Baatar, 77, said that shamans found and designated this new tree and told people to pray to it instead. However, visitors said that the new tree has not replaced the old tree, but instead they always pray to both trees.

Eej Mod is still heavily worshipped, even decades after it fell down. Most people didn’t know exactly when or how it fell. Baatar, 77, said that it suffocated because it was wrapped with so many scarves people gave as offerings. Another theory is that it was struck by lightning. Most visitors didn’t know when it fell, only that it was years ago. Tomor, 64, had a very different conclusion on how it fell. He said that the socialist government were against the worship of the tree, and they ordered it to be cut down during the religious purge in the 1980’s. Similarly, Ergil, 57, said that it was cut down, then burned, in 1976. Both of these men said that the people who killed the tree suffered in their lives afterwards. Tomor said that everyone who was a part of the process got sick and died young, while Ergil said that the man who cut it down now doesn’t have legs, and the man who burned it later died in a forest fire.

Tujiin Nars

Citizens of Sukhbaatar soum live on the edge of the Tujiin Nars national protected area. As such, it is a large presence in their lives. The forest is said to be life-giving. Without the forest, Degi, a 44 year old stay-at-home mother, predicted that everything would be destroyed.

Narangerel, 18, went further, saying that the forest is the home to nature spirits, and without trees, there would be no more nature spirits. Nine people discussed the importance of the forest as a resource for water. As Tuya, 54, said, “water is the beginning of life, and the forest is the beginning of water.” The forest was also cited as a resource for fresh air, food, medicinal plants, and wood for heating gers. Because the forest is so integral to people’s lives in the area, Bayarmaa, 50, said that we all “must conserve to live.” Being kind to nature is important, Tuya said, because we all depend on it. As Baatar, 77, stated, the forest is “our future, our children's future.”

Aside from the practical importance of the forest, respondents talked about its importance for their mental health, and most people stated that they use the forest to relax and become calm. Tsetseg, 30, called her visits to the forest “dirt church” because of how peaceful and spiritual it can be. Saraa, a 46 year old high school manager, said that visiting the forest was crucial in order to have a healthy body.

When talking about the forest, most people mentioned their family. Sukhbaatar, 41, used to camp and picnic in the forest with his family every week growing up. Saraa, 46, visited the forest with her family to pick fruits when she was a child. Bilge, 46, would camp in the forest periodically with his parents and other factory workers when the factory would organize trips into the forest. Multiple people said that their parents taught them the importance of the forest and its health, and why they should care about saving nature. Sukhbaatar’s father told him that if you love and protect nature, his job would be successful later in life.

People also learned about the forest in school. Narangerel, 18, and Tuya, 54, both had a class called “Nature Science,” where they learned how to conserve and why nature is important.

Today, kids are still learning about the importance of the environment and the forest. The oldest public school in Sukhbaatar earned a silver medal Eco-Schools award, “an internationally recognised award for excellence in environmental action and learning” based in the United Kingdom (Eco-Schools, 2018). This means that they have taken steps to educate their students about nature and have made their building more sustainable. In this school, they have tree-planting events each year, have multiple classes about conservation, maintain a recycling program, and encourage their students and staff to conserve energy while at school.

Education about the importance of nature is also being done outside of school. Local groups and movements are being developed to get adults involved as well. Tomor, 64, founded a small association with his neighbors with the aim of protecting the river by his house. This group patrols the river to keep people from littering or taking gravel from the riverbed. They also educate people, especially the people they catch littering, about river health and how to protect the river. This is a perfect job for him, as he noted that his dream growing up was to be nature’s security guard.

Outreach to the public is also being done by the government, who recently partnered with South Korea and the Northeast Asian Forest Forum to build an observatory tower overlooking the forest, specifically three sites of reforestation (from 2003, 2004, and 2005). Narangerel’s husband helped to build this tower, and she stressed the importance of it for showing the effects of deforestation. She said that everyone should visit the tower so they can understand better the history of the area.

The forest has had a rocky history in recent times, as discussed earlier in the paper. However, Naraa, 37, said that the forest used to look “like a bald man,” but is now getting

healthier. Sukhbaatar, 41, also noted that the forest was thicker now than it was 10 years ago. However, Sarnai, 35, said that she thought that unhealthy interactions with nature were getting more common, while Bayarmaa, 50, said the increasing tourists to the area was increasing the pollution to the forest and the river and Bilge, 46, said that illegal loggers are increasing.

Multiple people also noted that the forest is now more vulnerable to human actions than it has ever been. Bayarmaa, 50, lamented that the forest used to be grown naturally, but it cannot grow itself anymore. Baatar, 77, added that people now are making fires and drought, when they used to love and save the forest. Because of the power of people to affect the forest (both positively and negatively), Tomor said that a community effort was important, and that everyone should help together and be hardworking.

Conservation

Interviewees had many ideas for how regular people in the area could help protect the surrounding environment. The most common response, from 12 people, was planting trees. It was talked about an easy, effective measure that would help the forest in the future and can mitigate the effects of deforestation. Some respondents were more specific, saying that if you cut down a tree for whatever purpose, you should plant a tree. Aruna, a 23 year old doctor, cited a law stating that if you cut down a tree, you must plant two trees.

The other most common response was education and raising awareness. Some people said that too many people in this area don't know how to plant or prune trees, protect the soil, or what actions they do that harm the environment. Sarnai, 35, said that many people don't know about their responsibility to nature, but they have to be made aware. Ergil, 57, stated that people

in Mongolia don't think enough about their moral obligations to save and love the forest as much as people from other countries do.

The topic of logging was controversial as well. Ergil said that illegal logging is connected to the poor communities in the area who don't have comfortable homes and have resorted to logging to make money, while Baatar said that illegal logging started when factory workers lost their jobs after socialism ended and they couldn't find other sources of income. Narangerel stated that "everyone knows logging is wrong, but some people need wood to heat their gers." In general, respondents thought that these illegal activities were mostly being done by people in poverty, who, even if they want to protect the forest, don't have any other options.

Because of the necessity of wood, most people said that logging was acceptable as long as it's done responsibly. The conditions in which people found it acceptable included only getting dead wood from the forest instead of buying young trees, only buying wood in November after the forest cleaning projects finish, logging to clean and prevent forest fires, and having an agreement with the government. Sukhbaatar said the government sets a limit of how much wood can be logged sustainably, and as long as you stay within the limit, logging is okay.

Forest fires were cited as the biggest natural threat to the forests today. Baatar walked through the history of forest fires, saying that they were rare until a large destructive fire in 1995. After that time, fires became more common. Narangerel, 18, and Bayarmaa, 50, talked about how people visit the forest and are not careful with their campfires, which get out of control and burn large patches of land. Batbayar, a 29 year old worker in the Department of Tujiin Nars, said that the forest is now closed during the fall and spring, which are the driest seasons, in order to

prevent this kind of activity from happening. He also mentioned that herder communities in particular aren't careful enough when lighting fires while in the forest.

While some respondents were very active in the protection and conservation of the forest, many of them discussed the importance of the government. As Naraa, 37, said, "it's not up to me." Bayarmaa, 50, said that the people working to save the forest, namely the Department of Tujiin Nars, should hold the most responsibility. Even for the people who were active in restoration projects, the government's large capacity and available resources made it an important tool.

Multiple respondents had ideas for projects the government in Selenge could undertake. Ergil, 57, said that, instead of letting the logging business be a free market, the government (particularly the Department of Tujiin Nars) should facilitate the sale of trees from the forest. This way, they could more closely monitor to ensure that only dry, old trees would be taken. Also, the government would be in charge of profits, and could use these profits to fund further restoration and reforestation projects in the forest.

Tuya, a 54 year old forest engineer and head of the tourism department in the aimag, said that she has been working year round with her government colleagues to conserve the area. She had a yearly calendar in her office outlining monthly activities the government should do at different times of the year, including tree planting and forest cleaning. She said that the government follows the Buddhist calendar, as well, to decide what are good days to start projects. Tuya also noted a new program called "ownership contracts" that allows people to rent a piece of land for 60 years. In this time, they can use this land for small consumption of the fruits, plants, and wood. She said that the people renting the land could help protect it from

logging and mining operations, giving people an opportunity to protect an area of land without much effort.

Analysis

The construction of morality concerning the treatment of the forest in this area is heavily connected to the idea that nature is alive spiritually, not just physically. This can be seen through the belief in nature spirits, or masters of land. Because of their presence, people feel more obligated to treat nature with respect. Nature spirits were more widely believed in than both Buddhism and Shamanism. Because of the historical significance of nature and land in Mongolia, the fact that so many people trust the existence of nature spirits makes sense. Within different political systems and periods, the common religion has changed. However, throughout all of these periods, the connection with the land has been encouraged.

While all interviewees thought the forest was important, some only mentioned the physical uses and its importance for survival. Some of those who mentioned nature spirits didn't think much about their roles or uses and only said that they existed. However, most of the respondents felt innately connected with these spirits and thought of the spirits as nature's security guard, a force that could retaliate against negative actions and reward positive ones. While this didn't translate into the complete elimination of logging or pollution, it did make people more mindful of the effects of their actions.

To the people of Selenge, shamanism and the belief in nature spirits were not connected. This was surprising, because shamans connect with nature spirits in some of their rituals. Eight of the 15 interviewees had matching beliefs (either believed in both shamanism and nature spirits

or in neither), and nobody mentioned shamans when discussing their relationship with nature spirits. Some people did not see themselves as spiritual at all, but still believe in nature spirits.

The reason for this disconnect is not clear, but it could be connected to the perceived impacts of different religions in daily life. Most religions center around the believers' mentality, not physical proof, so it doesn't have much physical connection to people's lives. This is different than the environment, which you can physically see and feel. For somebody who is questioning the presence of spirits, a belief system that is connected to a physical thing would be easier to accept. People have proof of the superstitions surrounding the treatment of nature, and anybody who has heard about the effects of natural disaster must admit that people and nature are connected.

While the connection between man and nature is more important in a soum that is near to the forest is more apparent than in a city, there was still a disconnect between environmental problems in the forest and their lives outside of the forest. For example, one woman said that she didn't use the forest for practical purposes and only used it when she went camping. However, she used wood to heat her ger and said that she only camps once a year. Not everyone in this town goes camping regularly, so the problems in the forest for them could be something they do not relate to personally. If they don't see the impacts directly, it's much easier to remove themselves from the equation and say that they don't cause any harm. This pattern is far too common globally, but this example is much more localized than others around the world.

The construction of morality regarding the treatment of the forest is more unique to this area. In order for people to feel comfortable with cutting down a tree, for example, they must first ask the nature spirits for permission. In this way, they believe that they will not be punished

for this action and can continue to coexist with the spirits and the environment. If someone didn't believe in nature spirits, they would see this exercise as pointless. Since the end result is the same regardless, it doesn't matter whether or not you prayed before cutting down a tree. At the root of these practices, though, is respect for nature. When people pray before logging, they are being mindful of the impact they are making and showing they understand that their action might negatively affect the environment around them.

Family and community groups are important in forming people's perceptions of nature and the forest. Families visit *Eej Mod* and Tujiin Nars together. People learned about the importance of nature and conservation from their parents. Schools and businesses plant trees and clean up their areas together. Without this support and knowledge from their loved ones, some people may not have developed the passion they now have for nature. The practice of worshipping nature is also easier to make into habit and become familial tradition. Whenever respondents went camping with their families as children, they could observe their parents giving offerings and praying. If this happened often enough during their childhood, they could internalize those practices and continue them in their adult life. Conservation practices are made easier when they are done with other people. For example, one person will not feel motivation to plant a tree after logging if they're by themselves, citing too little time and resources. However, if it's presented as a community event, people will rally and be more excited about it.

The worship to *Eej Mod* is also heavily connected to family. All of the people visiting one day were a part of family groups, and the children were learning about the practices from observing their parents. It seemed like many of the people didn't know exactly why they did certain practices, but knew that it was important. Similar to the worship of nature spirits as a

whole, this practice is internalized at a very young age, so when they become adults it is already a habit.

The importance of education was also common between respondents. Most people learned about the forest in their childhood from various sources. This education, about the importance of nature and how to protect it, translates into the way people approach the environment and is an important tool for protecting it. Without this first step, efforts by small groups or the government will not be as successful. Education can lead to habits and help formulate a person's moral philosophy surrounding the treatment of nature.

Respondents also had specific perceptions of the roles of poverty and the government. On one hand, many had the view that poor people were largely responsible for the harmful practices. They were not necessarily immoral, but did not have enough resources to stop harming the environment. On the other hand, interviewees said that the government, both regional and national, should do more to protect and restore these natural areas. Many respondents had multiple ideas of what the government could be doing to help, because of the abundance of resources at their disposal.

While some people pushed the responsibility of solving these issues to the government, many respondents have actively participated in programs that work to solve local issues, such as cleaning litter out of the river or planting trees around the school. These projects are not for the benefit of the land masters, but for their community's well being. While cooperating with their neighbors, people feel empowered to address the issues they experience independently of any authority. Through the combination of efforts from the government and local groups, because of

moral responsibility and personal interest, Tujiin Nars and the surrounding area are becoming more stable, an effect that will be experienced for years to come.

Conclusion

Tujiin Nars is an important part of life in Selenge aimag. It provides clean water, fresh air, and wood to heat buildings. It is a place people can relax and unwind. Beyond that, it is believed to house nature spirits that can influence their lives, both positively and negatively. It is a place people pray to, give offerings to, and worship. *Eej Mod*, the birth of this forest, is a more specific connection to the spirits in the forest, and is a place where people can voice their wishes and ask for help. In this area, the connection between the forest and humans has led to the development of a moral philosophy in which there is a direct relationship between human action and nature's reaction.

Without the forest, many people believe that they would not be able to live. Because of this, they are invested in conserving and protecting the forest. Many community groups, like schools and businesses, host events for their members to plant trees and clean up litter. Other people have founded neighborhood associations to raise awareness and clean up their living area. Still others believe that, as long as they personally don't cause any damage to the environment, it is up to the government, as they have the funds, time, and expertise.

Looking towards the future, it is crucial to continue education about the forest and its importance starting at a young age, and continuing through adulthood. It is also important to help people feel empowered to take action themselves. In addition to continuing restoration efforts within the forest, the government should improve the quality of life for those in poverty by increasing education, career opportunities, and access to clean and renewable energy.

Regarding future studies, there were two possibilities that I discovered during my field work. The first was a deeper study of *Eej Mod*, regarding its history and the practices surrounding it. This idea was inspired by the varied accounts of how and when it fell, and more could be discovered about the beliefs surrounding this object. The second idea for future study is an investigation of historical media surrounding Tujiin Nars, including movies, poems, and documentaries. Multiple interviewees remembered first learning about the forest through various media, and a complete collection of these items would be beneficial for understanding the discourse surrounding the forest.

The connection between humans and nature is more pronounced in this area than in many other parts of the world. The forest is an important aspect of life in Selenge aimag, something that was even more apparent when the forest became threatened. While the beliefs surrounding this connection have not completely prevented harmful activities, they have made people more mindful about their influence on the environment and how they can develop a more sustainable relationship with the natural world.

Appendix I: Interviewees

Pseudonym/ Age/Home/ Gender	Current Job	Religion	Belief in Shamanism	Belief in Nature Spirits
1. Narangerel 18 Selenge Female	Dept. of Professional Control	Buddhist for whole life	Yes (father in law was a shaman)	Yes (land owners are everywhere)
2. Bayarmaa 50 Selenge Female	Primary school teacher	Buddhist for whole life	No (never have interacted with a shaman either)	Yes (everything is from nature)
3. Tsetseg 30 UB until 2014 Female	Family business planting trees and teaching	Christian for 16 years	No (but accepts that it's real because the spiritual world exists)	No (but believes that it's real)
4. Tuya 54 Selenge Female	Forest Engineer, head of tourism dept.	No, never	Can't answer because of job	Yes (people depend on them)
5. Naraa 37 Selenge Female	English Teacher	Sometimes Buddhist (when she needs help, she believes)	Yes (but has never visited)	Yes (nature's health is connected with our health)
6. Sarnai 35 Govi-Altai Female	English Teacher	No (answered "Shamanism")	Yes (4-5 years ago, when her brother became a shaman)	Yes (forest gives life, energy, and good things)
7. Batbayar 29 UB until 2012 Male	Department of Tujjin Nars	No (answered "Shamanism")	Yes (for about 10 years, father and grandfather were shamans)	Yes (the mountain has an owner)
8. Baatar 77 Selenge Male	Retired	Buddhist since birth	No (never visited)	Yes (natural disasters show how the spirits are feeling)

9. Bilge 46 Selenge Male	Tractor Driver	No, never	No, never	Yes (but can't explain what they do)
10. Tomor 64 Selenge Male	Farmer, beekeeper, truck driver, carpenter	Yes, only for the last 15 years (and believes in Eej Mod)	Not constantly, but has visited	No (spirits aren't important, but life is important and everything is alive)
11. Aruna 23 Selenge Female	Doctor	No, never (and people don't need religion)	No, never	Yes (but doesn't know much about them)
12. Ergil 57 Selenge Male	Security Guard at Elementary School	No, never	Not really, but hopeful that it's true (has never visited)	No, never
13. Degi 44 Selenge Female	Stay-at-home mother	Buddhist whole life	No, never visited	Yes (loving nature is good for your life)
14. Sukhbaatar 41 Selenge Male	Security Guard at Bank	No, never	No (but father was a shaman, so participated in rituals)	No, never
15. Saraa 46 Selenge Female	High School Manager	No, never	No, never visited	Yes

Appendix II: Basic Interview Structure

- I. Personal background
 - A. What is your name?
 - B. Where are you from?
 - C. How old are you?
- II. Spiritual/Religious Beliefs
 - A. Are you religious?
 - 1. What religion?
 - 2. How long have you believed in this religion?
 - B. What is the importance of your religion? Why?
 - C. Do you believe in the work of shamans?
 - 1. Have you ever visited a shaman? For what?
 - D. How common is spirituality here?
 - 1. Is it more common now than when you were young?
 - 2. Do you think religion is important to young people?
- III. Connection with Forest
 - A. Do you believe in nature spirits?
 - 1. What is their role?
 - B. How do you interact with the forest?
 - C. Why is the forest important?
 - D. How do you use the forest?
 - 1. How do you heat your ger?
- IV. Childhood
 - A. When you were a child, what were your perceptions about the forest?
 - 1. How is that different today?
 - B. What did you learn about Tujiin Nars growing up? From whom/where did you learn this?
 - C. Do you have any beliefs today about how you should treat the forest from your childhood?

V. Mother Tree

- A. What do you think is the importance of Eej Mod?
- B. Have you ever visited Eej Mod?
 - 1. If so, when and why?

VI. Conservation Practices

- A. Why is conservation important?
- B. What can regular people do to help conserve this area?
 - 1. What can you do to help protect this area?
 - 2. Have you done anything to help protect this area?
- C. Is there anything happening in this area now that is bad for the forest?
 - 1. Do you have any ideas on how these problems could be solved?
- D. What do you think about logging in the forest?

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