

Ovoo phenomenon of the Mongolians: Influencing well-being through the human–nature and human–spiritual relationships

**Buyandelger Batmunkh, Amgalan Tuya, Solongo Sandagjav,
Munkhdagva Unenbat, Ichinkhorloo Shagdar**

Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, Mongolia

The Mongolian ovoo is a cairn of stones and wood branches found in a natural environment. Because of stereotypes, ovoo is only understood as a place of worship or symbol, but it is a unique way to influence well-being through the human–nature and human–spiritual relationships. Hence, the aim of our study was to review the literature and provide an overview investigating the effects of the ovoo on the well-being of the Mongolians. The ovoo phenomenon has culture-specific characteristics and philosophical aspects related to identity, tradition and conservation, but the most interesting issue is undoubtedly its influence on well-being. In 2017, the ovoo and Mongolian worshipping rituals were inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding as part of "Mongolian traditional practices of worshipping the sacred sites". Understanding how the ovoo influences well-being through the human–nature and human–spiritual relationships is essential for addressing current challenges. The ovoo is of a wide significance, there are many ovoos in all areas where the Mongolians live. It should be emphasized again that the ovoo ritual is not only an intangible cultural heritage, but also a phenomenon that has a positive effect on well-being by interacting between human and nature in the spiritual sphere.

Keywords: ovoo ritual; ovoo phenomenon; well-being; human–nature relationship; human–spiritual relationship; ovoo worshipping



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BATMUNKH, Buyandelger, Associate Professor, Department of Basic Science, School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. Postal address: School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, Ard Ayush Street, 6th khoroo, Bayangol district, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. E-mail: buyandelger.b@mnums.edu.mn

ORCID: 0000-0003-2476-5078

TUYA, Amgalan, Lecturer, Department of Basic Science, School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. Postal address: School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, Ard Ayush Street, 6th khoroo, Bayangol district, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. E-mail: Amgalan@mnums.edu.mn

ORCID: 0000-0002-2443-7915

SANDAGJAV, Solongo, Lecturer, Department of Basic Science, School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. Postal address: School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, Ard Ayush Street, 6th khoroo, Bayangol district, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. E-mail: Solongo.s@mnums.edu.mn

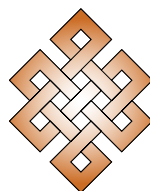
ORCID: 0009-0000-4451-0289

UNENBAT, Munkhdagva, Lecturer, Department of Basic Science, School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. Postal address: School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, Ard Ayush Street, 6th khoroo, Bayangol district, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. E-mail: Munkhdagva@mnums.edu.mn

ORCID: 0009-0009-7894-5163

SHAGDAR, Ichinkhorloo, Lecturer, Department of Basic Science, School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. Postal address: School of Nursing, Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences, Ard Ayush Street, 6th khoroo, Bayangol district, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. E-mail: ichinkhorloo.sh@mnums.edu.mn

ORCID: 0009-0004-1618-3785



ТЮРКО-МОНГОЛЬСКИЙ МИР

Статья

Феномен обо у монголов: влияние на благополучие через взаимоотношения человека с природой и духовным миром

**Буянделгер Батмунх, Амгалан Туяа, Солонго Сандагджав,
Мунхдагва Уненбат, Ичинхорлоо Шагдар**

Монгольский национальный университет медицинских наук, Монголия

Монгольское обо — это рукотворная груда камней и веток деревьев, которая встречается в естественной среде. Вследствие стереотипов обо воспринимается только как место поклонения или символ, но это уникальный способ влияния на благополучие посредством взаимоотношений человека с природой и духами. Таким образом, цель нашего исследования — проанализировать литературу, представить ее общий обзор и изучить влияние обо на благополучие монголов. Феномен обо имеет специфические культурные особенности и философские аспекты, связанные с идентичностью, традициями и сохранением природы, но самым интересным вопросом, несомненно, является его влияние на благополучие людей. В 2017 г. обо и монгольские обряды поклонения были внесены в Список нематериального культурного наследия человечества, нуждающегося в срочной охране ЮНЕСКО как часть «монгольских традиционных практик поклонения священным местам». Понимание того, как обо влияет на благополучие через взаимоотношения человека с природой и духовным миром, существенно для решения современных вызовов. Обо имеют большое значение, их много во всех районах проживания монголов. Следует еще раз подчеркнуть, что обряд обо — это не только нематериальное культурное наследие, но и явление, которое положительно влияет на благополучие благодаря взаимодействию человека и природы в духовной сфере.

Ключевые слова: обряд обо; феномен обо; благополучие; взаимоотношение человека и природы; взаимоотношение человека и духов; поклонение обо



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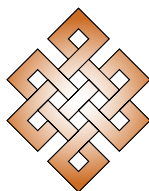
Буянделгер Батмунх — доцент кафедры фундаментальных наук Школы сестринского дела Монгольского национального университета медицинских наук. Адрес: Школа сестринского дела, Монгольский национальный университет медицинских наук, ул. Ард Аюш, 6-й квартал, Баянгольский район, Улан-Батор, Монголия. Эл. адрес: buyandelger.b@mnums.edu.mn

Амгалан Туяа — преподаватель кафедры фундаментальных наук Школы сестринского дела Монгольского национального университета медицинских наук. Адрес: Школа сестринского дела, Монгольский национальный университет медицинских наук, ул. Ард Аюш, 6-й квартал, Баянгольский район, Улан-Батор, Монголия. Эл. адрес: Amgalan@mnums.edu.mn

Солонго Сандагджав — преподаватель кафедры фундаментальных наук Школы сестринского дела Монгольского национального университета медицинских наук. Адрес: Школа сестринского дела, Монгольский национальный университет медицинских наук, ул. Ард Аюш, 6-й квартал, Баянгольский район, Улан-Батор, Монголия. Эл. адрес: Solongo.s@mnums.edu.mn

Мунхдагва Уненбат — преподаватель кафедры фундаментальных наук Школы сестринского дела Монгольского национального университета медицинских наук. Адрес: Школа сестринского дела, Монгольский национальный университет медицинских наук, ул. Ард Аюш, 6-й квартал, Баянгольский район, Улан-Батор, Монголия. Эл. адрес: Munkhdagva@mnums.edu.mn

Ичинхорлоо Шагдар — преподаватель кафедры фундаментальных наук Школы сестринского дела Монгольского национального университета медицинских наук. Адрес: Школа сестринского дела, Монгольский национальный университет медицинских наук, ул. Ард Аюш, 6-й квартал, Баянгольский район, Улан-Батор, Монголия. Эл. адрес: ichinkhorloo.sh@mnums.edu.mn



Introduction

The Mongols say that Chinggis Khan worshiped the *ovoo* as a symbol of success when heading off to a great war in a distant land¹. Currently, the Mongolians have not even counted the total number of *ovoos* in their country. In any case, it is generally accepted that it is a cultural tradition passed down from the ancestors. In 2017, the *ovoo* and worshipping rituals of the Mongolians were included in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding². The list does not use the term 'ovoo', but it refers to the features of Mongolian sacred sites (Hutchins, 2021), and all rituals and ceremonies are performed near *ovoo* (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 15). Examining the reasons behind the *ovoo*'s significance as an intersection in the Mongolians' natural and spiritual relationships from the standpoint of well-being is fascinating and crucial. According to an overview of research on the *ovoo*, it has been studied from many aspects: mythology (Dulam, 1989), symbolism (Dulam, 1999), nature conservation (Amarkhuu, 2000), sacrality (Ganbold, 2001), taboo (Erdenetuya, 2005), history (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017) and culture (Sukhbaatar, 2001). While *ovoo* worship, *ovoo* culture and *ovoo* ceremonial were typically defined quite narrowly in these studies, research into the *ovoo* phenomenon (Dal Zovo, 2021; Charleux, Smith, 2021) has made it possible to develop a more sophisticated conclusion based on several pieces of research information. This approach provides a favorable opportunity to evaluate the Mongolian *ovoo* as a concept of well-being. Several definitions of well-being are constantly evolving in light of new findings from various studies³. An in-depth study of the *ovoo* is not limited to understanding specific cultural ideas and practices. Through research on the *ovoo*, the following factors can be summarized at an academic level:

- anthropological awareness of human aspirations and efforts for well-being;
- practical experience of keeping the natural environment clean and passing it on to the descendants in the context of nature conservation;
- manners and scope with which people participate in state and public ceremonies and rituals;
- characteristics of the nation that make religious rituals evolve.

Materials and methods

In our research, we have selected the most informative literature about well-being and the *ovoo* phenomenon according to purposive sampling (Moser, Korstjens, 2018). The search strategies for articles and books were different. Articles published between 2000 and 2024 were searched using PubMed, Web of Science and Google Scholar to draw on the latest research findings published in peer-reviewed journals. The titles and abstracts were read and the articles were processed according to the inclusion (the results were limited to academic journals) and exclusion (conference papers) criteria. But books from Mongolian national and university libraries were used regardless of the year of publication.

The inclusion criteria were the following:

- (1) Title: Mongolian history, culture, philosophy, religion and customs with the *ovoo* ritual;
- (2) Language: Mongolian (cyrillic and traditional), English.

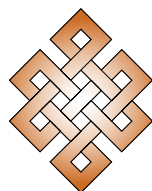
The exclusion criteria was other fields of research (archaeology, mineralogy, management, etc.) into places named with 'ovoo'.

The *ovoo* phenomenon affects the well-being of Mongolian people through two main areas of relationships: human–nature and human–spiritual. In order to clarify the well-being based on the human–nature relationship of the *ovoo* phenomenon, “the four channels of experience and the 10 constituents of well-being” (Russell et al., 2013: 475) were used as the main concept. Nature (ecosystem) provides the primary conditions for human life (Alcamo et al., 2003: 83) but also has an essential effect on creating human well-

¹ Erdenebulgan, Kh. (2023) *Sulden khukh ovoo*, or the great heraldic idol of Chinggis Khan. *Montsame News Agency*. 2023. January 16. Available at: <https://montsame.mn/mn/read/311355> (accessed 15.10.2024). (In Mongolian).

² Mongolian traditional practices of worshipping the sacred sites. Inscribed in 2017 (12.COM) on the List of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding. *ICH — UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Available at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/USL/mongolian-traditional-practices-of-worshipping-the-sacred-sites-00871> (accessed 10.04.2024).

³ Carter, S. (2016) *Holding it together: An explanatory framework for maintaining subjective well-being (SWB) in principals*: PhD thesis. [Toowoomba], University of Southern Queensland. xii, 394 p. Pp. 14–16.



being. Therefore, by using the ethnographic literature evidence of the Mongolians, let's take a deeper look at the effects of the *ovoo* on human well-being in the ten areas where the human–nature relationship affects well-being in an intangible way.

On the other hand, in the research pursued to clarify the ethnographic features of the human–spiritual relationship, an inductive analysis was conducted. It was coordinated with the development process of Mongolian history, culture, philosophy and religion. This research included the following stages: (I) analyzing relevant literature reviews; (II) exploring the constituents of well-being in the human–nature and human–spiritual relationships through the *ovoo* phenomenon in Mongolia. We will not touch upon the theory and model of well-being, but we will emphasize the inductive analysis of how the *ovoo* phenomenon connects people with nature and the spiritual world and thereby affects people's well-being within the framework of Mongolian ethnography.

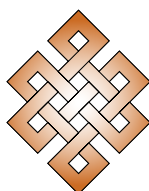
The place of the ovoo phenomenon in Mongolian culture

The *ovoo* is a ritual object built of stone and wood for valuing nature and communicating with spiritual beings in accordance with the unique features of Mongolian nomadic civilization. In English, it is denoted as 'heap' or 'pile' (Evans, Humphrey, 2003). Benedikte V. Lindskog explains the meaning of the Mongolian word 'ovoo' through the verb 'ovooloh' ('to heap up'). Its connotations are linked to central conceptual values among the Mongols (Lindskog, 2016). The origin of Mongolian *ovoo* has been explained in several ways. First, when Tibetan Buddhism spread to Mongolia during the 16th and 17th centuries, it became a part of religious practice and spread among the Mongolians (Atwood, 2004: 414–416; Sneath, 2014). However, this assumption is insufficient to fully explain the origin of all types of *ovoos* in Mongolia. Perhaps, in the 16th and 17th centuries, some traditions of building and worshipping the *ovoo*, directly related to Tibetan Buddhism, spread more strongly among the Mongolians. Cecilia Dal Zovo proposes that there may have been a connection between the culture and practices of the proto-Mongols who inhabited Mongolia during the Late Prehistory (the Bronze and Iron Ages, around 1,500–250 B.C.) before the advent of Tibetan Buddhism (Dal Zovo, 2021).

In our opinion, the *ovoo* reflects the influence of Buddhism in its historical development, but before that, it was formed under the influence of factors such as Mongolian indigenous worship, philosophical thinking and animal husbandry. The main places where the Mongolians build *ovoos* are mountains and highlands (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 36) because the ancient people in Mongolia lived in the mountains from the time of hunter-gatherer societies (Ochir et al., 2003: 60–64). In particular, mountain caves were the main dwellings of ancient humans (Sukhbaatar, Tsolmon, 1986: 27–28), which are understood to be inseparable from people's objective well-being. The possible facts related to the history of deifying and worshipping mountains from the ancient states (Xiongnu, Xianbei, etc.) in Mongolia to the Mongol Empire and later are summarised in *Table 1*. They are a significant endorsement of the place of the human–nature relationship among the nomads. The Mongolian tradition of honoring the sacredness of mountains and *ovoos* is not only for individuals but also for administrative units and even for national ceremonies (*turiin tahlga*) that have been continuously passed down to the present day.

Another important aspect of the *ovoo* is that it acts as a nexus of communication with spirits of the ancestors or the wider spiritual world. According to shamanism, a native religion of the Mongolians, the sacred *ovoo* is the home of the Lord or master of the land and water (Purev, 1999: 243). But the *ovoo* should not be understood only as a place where *savdag* and *lus* are worshipped but also as a sacrificial sanctuary where respect is paid to all the cherished deities (Mansang, 2012: 123). One unique tradition of worshipping the *ovoo* is the complex ceremony when shamans prepare sacrificial food and drink and vouch for people's good (Buyanbat, 1985: 40). The *ovoo* does not depend on the influence of Buddhism, and the custom of worshipping stones and honoring the dead predates the formation of monotheistic religions. For example, it can be found in traditions among the Bedouin (Avner, 2023).

The *ovoo*'s spiritual features are not limited to shamanism and has expanded its scope through Buddhism which spread to Mongolia through Tibet, creating another alternative. As a result, by the 18th century, Mongolian worship of the *ovoo* was no longer the sole representation of shamanism (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 50). This is because Buddhism turned into the official religion in Mongolia with political and administrative support and became inextricably mixed with indigenous worship and culture. Therefore, the spiritual relationship linked with the *ovoo* is of a composite character containing elements of both religions. This is directly related to the process of formation of Mongolian Buddhism that began in the middle



of the 16th century. Mongolian Buddhism is relatively different from Indian and Tibetan traditions and has developed with unique features (Batmunkh, Enkhbat, 2024). But let's note again that in this article we are studying the human–nature relationship in the *ovoos* phenomenon.

Table 1. A historical overview of Mongolian *ovoos* in mountains

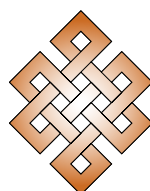
Таблица 1. Исторический обзор монгольских обо в горах

Mongolian historical period and stage		Historic places to represent <i>ovoos</i>	Main feature
Ancient Period	Bronze and Iron Age (1500-250 B.C)	Places with <i>Khirigsuurs</i>	An ancient type of burial in Mongolia
	Xiongnu (3rd century BC to the late 1st century AD)	<i>Khangai; Dalan Khar</i> mountains	The most important mountains in the historical records of that time. These mountains still have sacred <i>ovoos</i> .
	Rouran (330-555)	<i>Khangai</i> mountains	
	Turkic Khaganate (551-744)	<i>Otgontenger</i> mountain	
	Khitan Empire (916-1125)	<i>Khangai</i> mountains	
Medieval Period	Khamag Mongol (eleventh-twelfth century)	<i>Burkhan Khaldun</i> mountain	In connection with the great deeds of <i>Chinggis Khaan</i> , this mountain <i>ovoos</i> has been traditionally worshiped for centuries and even today at the state level.
	Great Mongol (1206-1260)		
	Mongolian Empire (1260-1368)		
	Political dissolution (end fourteenth century to beginning seventeenth century)		
	Mongolia under Qing Empire (seventeenth-beginning twentieth century)	<i>Otgontenger; Burkhan Khaldun; Bogdhan</i> mountains	The <i>ovoos</i> of these three mountains were worshiped as the highest ceremony of the Mongols.
Modern Period	Early twentieth century (1911-1923)		
	Socialist Mongolia (1924-1990)	None	The government has officially banned the sacrifice of mountains and <i>ovoos</i> .
	Democratic Development (since 1991)	Thirteen mountains	Each of the <i>ovoos</i> of these mountains is worshiped as a state ceremony every five years.

The ovoos: Aspects of well-being in the human–nature relationship

The *ovoos* is not only used for sacrificial purposes but also as a daily practice of nomadic herders. Refer to Table 2 for the practical significance of contributing to the practice (Table 2). Because of their wide significance, there are many *ovoos* in all areas where the Mongolians live. If they move to a new *nutag*¹ (Bumochir, 2019) and settle for a long time, they build an *ovoos* similar to the one in their old *nutag* and use it to express

¹ *Nutag* is not only a territorial scale, but also a manifestation of different ways of human existence and interaction with non-human beings.

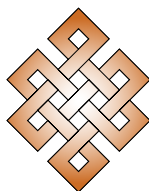


their clan and lineage traditions. Among the Shinehen Buryats who migrated to China in the early 20th century, there are *ovoos* used as a means helping to legitimize themselves in the host country (Dumont, 2021).

Table 2. Classification and definition of the *ovoo*

Таблица 2. Классификация и определение овоо

Classification of <i>ovoo</i>	Types of <i>ovoo</i>		Definition	Common location	Number of <i>ovoo</i> (common quantities)
	English	Mongolian			
Ovoo with offerings	Sky <i>ovoo</i>	Tenger <i>ovoo</i>	Sacrifices are offered to heaven, mediated by mountains <i>ovoos</i>	At the peaks of famous big mountains	Three <i>ovoos</i> (shamanist: heaven, earth, human; or buddhist Ayush, Shakyamuni, Maitreya)
					Four <i>ovoos</i> for one of the ninety-nine heavens of shamanism
					The five <i>ovoos</i> are for the five heavens of almsgiving (existence, father, mother, spirit, life)
					shamanism
					Twenty-seven <i>ovoos</i> , or King <i>ovoo</i> , dedicated to Chinggis Khaan's accession to the throne at the age of twenty-seven
					The thirty-three <i>ovoos</i> are dedicated to the thirty-three heavens (mother earth)
Ovoo without offerings	Mineral springs <i>ovoo</i>	Rashaanii <i>ovoo</i>	Ovoo erected in places believed to be inhabited by water spirits	Source of springs, or alongside lakes, ponds or rivers	An one <i>ovoo</i> (for water spirits)
	Source of springs <i>ovoo</i>	Bulgiin <i>ovoo</i>			
	Herder families <i>ovoo</i>	Khot ailiin <i>ovoo</i>	An <i>ovoo</i> for one or more families to worship together	Highlands near families	An one <i>ovoo</i> (for worship only at the beginning of the lunar calendar, or tsagaan sar)
	Roads and tracks <i>ovoo</i>	Zamiin <i>ovoo</i>	Ovoo for keeping people from getting lost in rural areas	Near of roads, or tracks	An one <i>ovoo</i>
	Ovoo of along passes	Davaanii <i>ovoo</i>	Ovoo, representing crossing the mountain	At the around peak of a mountain pass	An one <i>ovoo</i>
	Boundaries <i>ovoo</i>	Hiliin <i>ovoo</i>	Ovoo to mark the boundaries of administrative units	No specific location is indicated	Two <i>ovoos</i>
	Informational <i>ovoo</i>	Temdeg <i>ovoo</i>	Ovoo for careful not to injure people or animals	Edges of land such as ditches and canyons	An one <i>ovoo</i>



The *ovoo* is not a unique natural formation, such as a cave or cliff, an element of nature like trees and grass, or even a natural phenomenon such as wind, storm, snow, rain or lightning. However, the *ovoo* is a human-made object that cannot be separated from any natural factors (its location is at the top of a mountain, on the banks of a river or lake, and its materials are stone, wood, dirt, etc.). The worldview of the Mongolian people and their distinctive way of interacting with the natural world form the foundation of the ancient *ovoo* sacrificial practices (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 59). This is because the Mongols do not separate man, society and culture from nature, and this feature can be seen more deeply in the concept of the 'four ontologies': animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism (Descola, 2013). This characteristic is essential not only in ethnography but also in discussions about the classification of world heritage. For instance, it has been proposed that it will be challenging to define the terms 'material', 'natural' and 'immaterial' if nature and culture are too sharply divided from one another without enough logical justification (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004: 60).

Why can the *ovoo* be considered a part of nature? The *ovoo* can be built anywhere, anytime, by anyone. For example, an *ovoo* has even been built in the courtyard of the Mongolian Embassy in France (Charleux, Smith, 2021). However, according to a traditional Mongolian custom, the *ovoo* is always erected in a natural environment and people often use non-artificial materials such as stone and wood. Thus, the *ovoo* receives a new compositional form and structure due to human activity but has the peculiarity that the form in nature remains unchanged in space and materials (stones and trees, respectively). When erecting the *ovoo*, the Mongolians take the natural form into account, so it can be understood that it is more stable under the influence of natural processes such as wind, rain and seasonal changes. If it had not been built by human consciousness and purposeful actions, it would remain a component of nature or return to nature if people stopped using it for their purposes. Based on this, the *ovoo* is a part of nature that has been modified under the influence of humans.

Although a person who builds the *ovoo* is a human being, there is no evidence that it directly affects physical health. Ecosystem degradation empirically exerts influence on physical wellness, and it is practical to address the natural environment in a health-friendly and accessible manner in order to support human physical health adequately (Jardine et al., 2007). Nature conservation is one of the *ovoo*'s most pivotal roles in Mongolian civilization (Erdenetuya, 2014: 65–69). Nature conservation methods and forms are relatively different from modern Western approaches and are more traditional (Humphrey, Mongush, Telengid, 1993). A faith-based approach is one key rationale for deepening the meaning of this unique conservation tradition centered on the *ovoo* (Hultkrantz, 1978). The erection of the *ovoo* begins the process of transforming even an ordinary environment into a sacred place. This occurs in two main ways: hierophanic and theophanic (Park, 1994: 245). According to the Mongolians, by offering sacrifices to the *ovoo*, the environment of a *nutag* can be balanced (Lindskog, 2014), or it symbolizes that the work of a person making the offering will be productive, profitable and free from physical illness. For example, people who pass by the road (*zamiin*) *ovoo* go around clockwise (*nar zuv*) and say, 'Yields of the *ovoo* belong to thee, earnings of the game belong to me' and add a stone or leave offerings. On the other hand, when offering food to the *ovoo* of the spring (*rashaanii*), the main goal is to help the body heal as quickly and well as possible (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 68). Thus, on the one hand, the *ovoo* creates conditions for nature conservation by respecting the surrounding area of the *ovoo* as sacred through religious ideas and rituals (communication with the owners of the land, etc.). This positively affects maintaining the environment accessible and favorable to human health. On the other hand, in places with powerful physical healing properties, the belief that the *ovoo* has a direct effect on human health persists.

How specific activities, such as celebrating an important ritual in a natural environment, affect human health and well-being has not been specifically studied. Still, as a general category, they are directly related to the three channels of human interaction with nature: knowing, perceiving and interacting (Russell et al., 2013). However, the fourth channel, living, cannot be aligned with the Mongolians' concept of the *ovoo*. For example, it is forbidden to spend the night next to a sacred *ovoo*, to live in its vicinity, to defecate, to disturb the animals in the area, and to disturb plants and soil (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 73). In most cases, the day of worshipping the sacred *ovoo* is scheduled many months in advance, and preparations for it begin. These preparations activate people's perception of the *ovoo* or their sensory channel of knowledge about the ecosystem through experience (Russell et al., 2013). People prepare to make simple offerings to the *ovoo* in their daily activities, but they also interact with nature through the knowing channel.

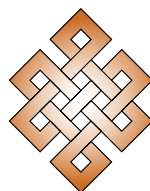


Photo 1. A willow-built ovoos. Photo by D. Battulga, 2018.
 Фото 1. Обо, построенное из ивы. Фото Д. Баттулга, 2018 г.

Viewing the *ovoos* in some way (remote viewing, visiting the environment, etc.) or watching a video capturing its form or sacrificial behavior forms the basis of the perceiving channel's interaction with the *ovoos*'s surrounding ecosystem. Observing nature not only reduces stress levels but also improves mental health (Kaplan, 2001). The results showed that time spent in nature has a positive effect on a person's mental health, and there was also a high likelihood of mental health recovery through nature travel, with approximately 90% of all cases studied showing one or more statistically significant effects (Kuo, 2001). The *ovoos* ritual of the Mongols is a religious ritual that engages those who participate in it during traditional ceremonies (Khurchabaatar, Ujume, 1991: 267–268; Sainjargal, 2008: 370), the *ovoos* festival (Tomikawa, 2006; Batmunkh, Boldbaatar, 2021) in order to interact with the ecosystem.

Spending time in natural environments improves concentration and reduces fatigue and irritability (Herzog, Maguire, Nebel, 2003). Consequently, there is evidence that contact with nature actively promotes recovery after bereavement and similar psychological distress (Ottosson, Grahn, 2008). People believe that participation in the *ovoos* ritual can improve their health. Still, they tend to believe in the invisible connection rather than in scientific evidence of the relationship between man and nature. The main mechanism for the success of nature-based therapy methods is the positive effects of nature on mental well-being (Maller et al., 2006). Therefore, explaining the ritual of worshipping (*rashaanii ovoos*) during the treatment that utilizes curative spring and lake water (*rashaan*), which is a form of nature-based therapy in Mongolian traditional medicine, can present a more scientific perspective in terms of the mental effects of human interaction with nature.

The *ovoos* is one of the main centers of the spiritual (non-human) world and related forces in its ecosystem, and due to this characteristic, it has an impact not only on human mental health but also beyond. It can be understood that the Mongols believe that each *ovoos* has a range of functions only within its ecosystem, and in this process, "the interaction between the human individual and the non-human landscape entity" (Watters, 2021) occupies a key position. Ignoring the spiritual connection between humans and the natural world

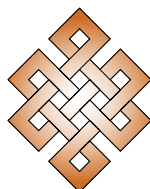


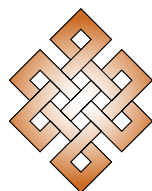
Photo 2. An ovoo built at the top of a mountain. Photo by D. Battulga, 2021.

Фото 2. Обо, построенное на вершине горы. Фото Д. Баттулга, 2021 г.

can negatively affect human well-being. However, the approach of academic literature focused on Western philosophy may undercharacterize people's connection to nature (Vining, Merrick, Price, 2008). The main features of Mongolian ideology are as follows.

The *ovoo* is necessarily associated with spiritual well-being, as it largely represents well-being for the individual, or more broadly, the people of that *nutag* and the overall ecosystem which is considered culturally intact by the Mongols. By erecting the *ovoo*, the ecosystem seems to be changed by human actions, but considering the *ovoo*'s "models of the world" (Birtalan, 1998: 200, 206), it is the way to least affect nature. *Dayandeerhi* Cave and its *ovoo* were a major center of Mongolian shamanism until the 16th century (Banzragch, Sainkhoo, 2004). Consequently, hylozoism, which considers nature to be alive as a whole, occupies a significant place in Mongolian mythology (Batmunkh, Enkhbat, 2024), which is important for clarifying the influence of the *ovoo* on spiritual well-being. However, this is a spiritual approach to the *ovoo*, influenced only by nature and related factors. Elements of nature such as plants, animals, mountains and water are elements of rituals and ceremonies associated with the concept of spirit in many indigenous cultures (Russell et al., 2013). The *ovoo* festival (Tomikawa, 2006; Tsogt, Buyandelger, 2012) thus became a traditional Mongol ceremony and is still practiced today.

The *ovoo* significantly affects the sense of control and security among the Mongolians. According to the Mongolian worldview, the most important basis for security is balance (*tentsver*) between humans and nature, along with other factors that affect it (Humphrey, Onon, 1996: 363). If this balance cannot be maintained, Mongolian nomadic civilization, which is based on animal husbandry and herding throughout the year's four seasons, will face difficulties. In achieving this balance, the *ovoo* ritual and related customs play a crucial role. That is why *ovoo* sacrifices are mainly performed in summer and autumn (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 104). They are dedicated to overcoming the challenges of winter and spring that are the most difficult seasons for migratory livestock. By interacting with natural factors and non-natural elements believed to be under control, people gain a sense that they can control the positive and negative effects to a certain extent and appropriately maintain balance. Ultimately, all of this is an attempt to guarantee the well-being connected to solidifying one's cultural existence.



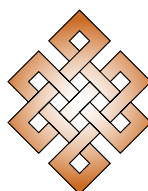
Education is vital to human existence and enhances well-being (Anand, Hunter, Smith, 2005). Although there is no set structure for teaching the *ovoo*'s theme and content, traditional Mongolian home and school education introduce children to the importance of nature in human life, particularly in nomadic agriculture, society and culture through oral stories, mainly myths (Chao, Li, Reyes-García, 2023: 352). These stories provide a means of understanding the underlying worldview. These legends often connect natural formations and characteristics with the *ovoo*, Mongolian heroes, wrestlers and the Naadam festival. Children and young people inherit Mongolian cultural values and traditional customs by observing and imitating the elders and ceremony leaders and by participating in *ovoo* ceremonies. It is important to ensure the preservation of native culture. Nature provides a restorative environment that supports focus and enhances cognitive functions (Kaplan, 1995). Since all *ovoo* practices occur in nature, children and young people are undoubtedly influenced by the immediate mastery of simple rituals and routines. Involvement of children in the *ovoo* ritual can help to preserve the collective customs and traditions of the relationship with nature.

Ecosystems include humans, and many people's well-being depends on the land and natural environment (Russell et al., 2013). Particularly for nomadic pastoralists, interaction with nature is crucial to the formation of their sense of self and forms the cornerstone of their indigenous culture and way of life. The study of the Anthropocene has lagged behind in recent years in terms of identifying the impact of supernatural forces and non-living environments on human civilization and culture (Pískatá, 2021). Investigating the geosociality of the *ovoo* is crucial for understanding the pattern of the "commingling of the geologic and the social" (Pálsson, Swanson, 2016: 149) as well as for a thorough examination of how it impacted the development of the Mongols' "ecological identity" (Thomashow, 1996). The *ovoo* uses certain behaviors in the natural environment to create relationships between humans and non-humans or between ancestors and descendants (Pískatá, 2021). This enhances people's sense of belonging, creating special memories and a desire to love and protect their place. Thus, by participating in the *ovoo* ritual and various preparatory activities with family and friends, social groups can develop a style of relationship with nature, which is "equally important for social reasons..." (Russell et al., 2013: 487).

Due to disparities in their perspectives on environmental values, the rural Mongolians are more protective of their traditional *ovoo* practices (Kaczensky, 2007). This is partly because urban residents can no longer support themselves through animal husbandry due to environmental and climatic factors. People's sense of belonging is badly impacted by the disruption of traditional activities like hunting, fishing and travelling



Photo 3. An *ovoo* erected on the shore of a lake. Photo by D. Battulga, 2020.
 Фото 3. Обо, воздвигнутое на берегу озера. Фото Д. Баттулги, 2020 г.



because of climate change and environmental degradation (Russell et al., 2013). As a result, the Mongolian *ovoo* ritual plays a significant role in giving the nomadic society its original meaning again.

As some researchers have noted, “The connection between nature and identity can also be mediated by particular species” (Ibid.: 488). For the Mongols, cattle serve as an intermediary, and their system of rites and ceremonies centered around the *ovoo* sufficiently ensures their existence and well-being. Because the *seterleh* ritual is performed at the *nutag*’s *ovoo* ceremony. *Seterleh* means saving an animal’s life from death (Sarangerel, 1990: 128). Offering the best of the livestock to the *nutag*’s deities of the sky, earth and water represents the welfare of the entire herd of animals and the *nutag*’s community. Some scholars have defined this interaction as “emotional and ethical entanglements of human–animal relations” (Convery et al., 2005: 100). Since human and animal health are interdependent, the *ovoo* ritual through the *seterleh* ceremony is aimed at human well-being (Zinsstag et al., 2005). The *ovoo* is a cultural phenomenon common not only in Mongolia, but also among Turkic-speaking peoples, for example, the Tuvans. It influences the formation of an “ecocentric identity” (Stairs, 1992: 119–120) associated with the characteristics of nomadic civilization and animal husbandry.

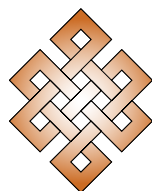
The main feature of the Mongolian social organization is the “appanage community” (Atwood, 2012: 2). Throughout the 17th–20th centuries, the form of the banner (*khoshuu*) prevailed. Within their borders, members of a *khoshuu* performed the *ovoo* ritual to express their interests and aspirations (Bass, 2021) and, in some cases, used it for administrative accounting and military readiness (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017). In modern times, the *ovoo* ritual is used by local authorities (*aimags*, *soums*) to reintegrate members of their community and restore their territorial identity. On the other hand, the *ovoo* served as a material symbol of the border of the Mongolian people, and it was called the *ovoo* border (*hiliin*) (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017). Because there were no clear borders to delineate their territories since ancient times, the *ovoo* was used as a marker, and sacrifices were performed jointly by neighboring communities. Given that a natural location is identified as the most suitable for civilization (Newell, 1997), the Mongolian location is the most suitable environment for nomadic animal husbandry. That is why herders have a sense of belonging to the area as a conscience and integral factor in their livestock farming. The *ovoo* can be understood as a form of expression of this feeling.

People gain a sense of belonging to a social group through their relationship with nature, increasing positive well-being aspects (Nisbet, Zelenski, Murphy, 2011). Not only is this process directly related to the Mongolian concept of *nutag* (homeland), but the ritual of participation and performance of *nutag* and non-*nutag* *ovoo* sacrifices is different among people. When worshipping the *ovoo* of one’s *nutag*, one should not directly touch the main *ovoo* but must perform a ritual of veneration of the minor *ovoo*, which is believed in by such people as queens, gatekeepers and soldiers (Sanjid, 1988: 21).

Regarding subjective well-being, relationships with nature are ranked similarly to things like marriage, education and income (Howell et al., 2011). In Mongolia each of the fourteen mountains’ sacred *ovoos* (a mountain that is under special protection by the government and worshipped together with the participation of the government and the public at a set time) is the primary cause for the special protection of a mountain or natural park. As a result, it is now required by law that each *ovoo* be honored every five years. This special protection becomes the main factor in increasing the number of plant and animal species in the environment, which in turn affects a person’s subjective well-being through the *ovoo*.

The ovoo: Aspects of well-being in the human–spiritual relationship

The *ovoo* shares a close relationship with the concept that every land and body of water has /a/ potent ‘owner/owners’ (*ezen/ezed*) and a domain dedicated to them (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 36). It is known that a mountain *ezen* is at the top of the mountain, a water *ezen* is at the river’s source, and if there are several mountains close by, it is at the highest points of the mountains, such as a pass and a notch. *Ezed* are powerful supernatural beings who control and unite the spirits of all earthly and aquatic phenomena and processes in their ‘jurisdictions’. *Ezed* are located in the horizontal space above the top layer of earth and water, or the boundary between earth and sky (Buyandelger, 2009: 42) and are ever-moving objects that respond to human interactions with their surroundings and objects under their control. This makes it plausible to believe that the *ovoo*, situated atop a mountain or near a water source, developed into one of the main ways to communicate with the land and the world’s water. The *ovoo* cannot be regarded as a permanent home for supernatural beings (Lindskog, 2016); rather, it necessitates communication between



humans and these spiritual entities. These human and spiritual relationships through the *ovoo* can be understood to influence well-being through various forms such as mythology, shamanism and Buddhism, according to the characteristics of Mongolian thought.

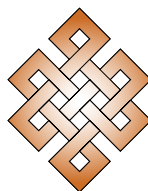
Mythology is a distinct method of thinking that stresses not being 'true' but 'meaning' (Buyandelger, 2009: 26). Based on mythology, there has emerged a viable non-scientific, imaginative and logical explanation for the impacts of the *ovoo*, both positive and negative, on human well-being as well as on other realms. That is why the *ovoo* is dedicated not only to human–nature, but also to human–spiritual balance. This idea became customary and common in daily life among Mongolian nomadic pastoralists. The phrase 'Yields of the *ovoo* belong to thee, earnings of the game belong to me' is an abstract form of oral tradition that conveys the idea of bestowing well-being upon oneself as a reward for one's contribution to nature and spiritual existence (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017). It is typically said after presenting a stone or an offering.

The idea that the *ovoo* holds an enigmatic inner ability to communicate with spiritual creatures through words and rites makes sense when seen within the framework of mythology, and it is typical in Mongolian oral literature to find such interpretations (Dulam, 1989: 21). The Mongols traditionally worship stone, the main element that makes up an *ovoo*. The protagonist is frequently described in oral literature as powerful, like a rock, or as born of stone (Buyandelger, Khosbayar, 2020: 26). As a result, the use of stones in funeral rites persisted from the Neolithic era to the current Mongol period (Erdenebaatar, 2002: 31), demonstrating not only the *ovoo*'s ancient origin but also its connection to the spiritual realm (Dal Zovo, 2021).

The *ovoo* festival (Naadam) is held to entertain the ezed of land and water through *ovoo* sacrifices (Mansang, 2012: 128). It is a social process forming an 'innate identity' of the community members because of its recurrence and traditions (Tomikawa, 2006). It was crucial that rather than a strong wrestler or a horse racer, the nutag deity is represented by a man or a horse during the *ovoo* festival. By providing entertainment for these otherworldly creatures, the event aims to enhance the local population's well-being (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 73).



Photo 4. An *ovoo* representing crossing a mountain. Photo by U. Munkhdagva, 2020.
 Фото 4. Обо, представляющее собой переход через гору. Фото У. Мункхдагвы, 2020 г.

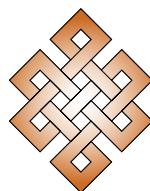


Chants and incantations are widely used in *ovoo* ceremonies to communicate one's own and other people's aspirations. Therefore, it is thought that praying for good things will indirectly impact someone's life, such as a bountiful growth of plants and vegetables, balanced sun and rain on land and water, and a pleasant weather with less wind. Consequently, the concept and practice of worshipping the 'Eternal Blue Sky and Mother Earth' (Etugen) were executed through the *ovoo* offering (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017: 44). The mythological idea of the *ovoo* was updated and built upon the idea of the sacral sky, strengthening the tradition and creating State Sacred Mountains (*ovoo*) that were revered not only by the locals, but by the entire population of the area. As a result, the concept of the *ovoo* from Mongolian mythology served as the foundation for preserving the *ovoo* ritual within the context of shamanic and Buddhist teachings, enriching and renewing its significance for the welfare of people.

According to shamanism, worshipping the *ovoo* starts with greeting its *ezen*, offering food and drink, then going on to express whatever you wish verbally and lastly bidding farewell with warm regards (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017). The *ovoo* is, therefore, a key object in shamanism that facilitates communication with the spiritual realm. This communication's primary goal is to draw in otherworldly elements that will enhance a person's quality of life while they are living in *nartu* (the world where humans live). *Ovoo* texts (*ovoonii san*) are oral traditions passed down from generation to generation for blessing auspiciousness, praising the *ezen*, honoring them, inviting blessings and apologizing (Erdenetuya, 2014). Later, during the spread of Buddhism, it was converted into written form (Sangha sutras) and was read mainly in Tibetan. *Ovoonii san* vary in size and formulation but share a common internal structure and content. The idea of *ovoonii san* is wishing to make people's livestock as numerous as the stars in the sky, to make the crops as abundant as the roots in the earth, ward off adversities (diseases, famine, drought, robbery, quarrels, etc.), to pray for people's long life, prosperity and a successful development of a desired outcome (Bayarmaa, Buyandelger, 2017). It is not a real regulation, but it means to support one's well-being by solving supernatural factors that cannot be done within the scope of one's own consciousness and actions with the help of the spiritual world.

In Mongolia, Buddhism spread three times (Sainbileg, 2018); the third one, which started in the 16th century, was greatly assimilated into the national worship and culture thanks to political and administrative backing. Buddhism created 'syncretism', a practice that integrated aspects of both religions by using the idols and customs of both the old and new religions (Purevjav, 1978: 54). In this way, the *ovoo* ritual began to combine shamanic rituals with Buddhist chants and, for instance, in the eastern part of Buryatia, the ritual and offering became a complex of chants, so that one half of the ritual became shamanic and the other was Buddhist (Mykhailov, 1987: 182). As a result, the Mongols, who understood the image of earth and water only as a representative of the shaman inviting the spirit to himself, painted portraits based on the established Buddhist canon and placed them in some Buddhist temples or depicted them in cham (*tsam*) dance (Purevjav, 1978: 58). Thus, the ritual form of the Mongols was enriched with the influence of Buddhism and passed on as an integral part of spiritual relations for the well-being of the people.

The most influential Buddhists in Mongolia actively participated in the development of the *ovoo* worship ritual. For instance, Zaya Pandita Luvsanperenley (1642–1715) created numerous *ovoonii san* texts (Ibid.: 47). As a result of all this, among the Mongolians, the features of the Buddhist ritual were formed, where monks worshiped the *ovoo*. Monks' involvement is crucial for guiding the *ovoo* offering in the correct direction and producing positive outcomes from an arrangement with the *gazryn ezen* (Lindskog, 2016). As Buddhism played a leading role in *ovoo* sacrifices, organizations responsible for sacrifices and established customs and rituals were formed according to the hierarchy of Mongol administrative units (*soum* — secondary subdivisions, *aimag* — provinces, etc.). For instance, in the vicinity of the *ovoo*, a brand-new Buddhist institution called the 'Ovoo Temple' emerged (Khurchabaatar, Ujume, 1991: 267). When building the *ovoo*, recitations known as *aravnai* are performed in addition to calling upon the *ezen* of earth and water. These recitations are meant to purify any treasures (*shunshig*) — such as coral, pearls, gold, silver, sandalwood, juniper, incense and *khadag* (Buddhist traditional ceremonial scarves) — that would be utilized to construct Buddhist deities (Ibid.: 268). According to Mongolian Buddhism, the water *ezen* (*lus*) rest and should not be worshipped from the 15th of midwinter to the 7th of early spring (Sanjid, 1988: 23). All these processes can be seen as the goal that guided Buddhist teachings and practices to realize the traditional relationship between man and spiritual well-being through the *ovoo*.



Conclusion

The positive effect on well-being through the *ovoo* in the form of the human–nature relationship is reflected in ten spectrums (physical health; mental health; spirituality; certainty and sense of control and security; learning and capability; inspiration and fulfillment of imagination; sense of place; identity and autonomy; connectedness and belonging; subjective well-being) (see: Russell et al., 2013: 474). The practical significance of this study lies primarily in the formation of a suitable combination of traditions and challenges of the *ovoo* phenomenon. A deeper understanding of its effects on well-being will provide important impetus for the development of its beneficial aspects for human health. The *ovoo* ceremony, as we have discovered earlier, is a significant practice of wishing for and believing in the fulfilment of well-being through the link between humans, nature and spirits. It has developed into a phenomenon, with numerous other sociopolitical goals in addition to being a component of Mongolian culture and a religious expression. The Qing (Manchu) dynasty administration had a restrictive policy and was hesitant to acknowledge the significance of the *ovoo* in Mongolian culture (Natsagdorj, 1963: 92). However, since the 18th century, the number of *ovoos* in Mongolia has greatly increased because the Mongolians used to mark the boundaries of a province (*khil*) by erecting *ovoos* (Gongor, 1978: 274). Since this *khiliin ovoo* is not worshipped, it does not affect the spiritual relationship, but it has an important effect on the well-being expressed by the relationship of the people living in that *nutag* with nature. Although the recognition and prevalence of the *ovoo* phenomenon has varied throughout historical development, its impact on the well-being of Mongolian people has remained stable. That is why the *ovoo* ceremony is deeply intertwined with other elements of Mongolian traditional culture and is still one of the most important ceremonies related to the concept of *nutag*.

Ovoo sacrifices among the Mongolians can be understood as supported by the public process of devotion blended with protecting the environment. The *ovoo* is an important phenomenon to protect the land and nature around it. This positively affects the well-being of people by guaranteeing the real basis of their existence. Different aspects of the human–spiritual relationship of the *ovoo* ceremony represent public faith, increase the sense of well-being of the general public by meeting their need for contacts with a spiritual being. The *ovoo* worship was eventually discontinued in the 1930s as a result of government policies and acts targeting monks and temples. The *ovoo* ceremony was outlawed because religious beliefs and customs superseded the merits of enhancing human welfare via interaction with the natural world. In the 1990s, however, the ceremony of *ovoo* sacrifice started to be reintroduced in Mongolia as part of social reforms and the restoration of people's freedom of worship. Investigating and promoting the essence of the *ovoo* ritual to improve the harmonious coexistence of human, natural and spiritual realms is one of the most important strategies to overcome these obstacles effectively. This strategy concludes that contrary to what was customary in the past, it is more crucial to cultivate scientific reasoning than it is to rely solely on religious consciousness. Finally, although we have presented only the origins and significance of the Mongolian *ovoo* worship, it is not only a tradition of the Mongolian cultural world. This tradition is related in many ways to the cultural world of shamanism and Buddhism, where there is religious syncretism. Therefore, it is important to expand the scope of this research in the future.

Author contributions

BATMUNKH, Buyandelger: conceptualization, methodology, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing.

TUYA, Amgalan: methodology, software, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing.

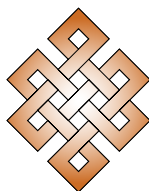
SANDAGJAV, Solongo: methodology, resources, software, writing — original draft.

UNENBAT, Munkhdagva: conceptualization, resources, visualization, writing — original draft.

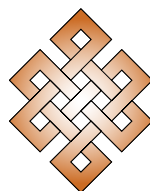
SHAGDAR, Ichinkhorloo: supervision, resources, writing — original draft.

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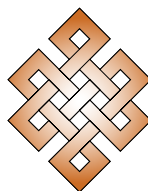
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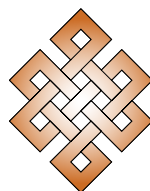
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