

**‘A miracle walking tree’:
The supernatural in the landscape mythology and social space of
contemporary Mongolia**

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Abstract

This article examines a peculiar case in contemporary Mongolian landscape mythology – a tree with the supernatural ability to move. The tree features as a character in contemporary folk narratives and is the object of worship practices shared by various communities. This article investigates the basis of Mongolian folk traditions from which the conception of this unusual tree grew, the cultural concepts the legend transmits, and the roles and functions it performs in contemporary vernacular beliefs and social interactions. This article is based on both fieldwork materials and internet sources.

Key words: Mongolian folklore, landscape mythology, mobility and immobility of the supernatural, vernacular beliefs, social practices

Introduction

This article¹ is devoted to an unusual case of contemporary Mongolian place lore: a sacred tree, whose supernatural ability to move around features as a core motif both in narratives and ritual practices. This motif is connected to local traditions, mostly found in the neighbouring provinces of Bayankhongor and Arkhangai (in the central part of Mongolia), where I first became acquainted with the notion of a miraculous walking tree during summer fieldwork in 2015 and 2016. All attempts to find examples of “walking” trees in other contemporary traditions in Mongolia (and related regions: Inner Mongolia, Buryatia, Kalmykia, and the close Turkic and Altaic traditions), as well as in previous written sources failed to give any satisfactory results. Meanwhile, in the space of Mongolian internet and social media, the unusual tree of Bayankhongor and Arkhangai began to appear from 2011 on, and the internet forms of its existence continue to provide valuable data for research into this case.

Despite its extraordinariness, this supernatural tree does not exist in a cultural vacuum in present-day Mongolia. The investigation of this case reveals a diversity of folk traditions and important cultural concepts that melted together to produce a breeding ground of beliefs, images and motifs with regard to the “walking tree”. In this article, besides introducing the supernatural ‘walking’ tree, Bökh Mod, I shall discuss its image, motifs, and rites in vernacular beliefs and practices, and explain its roles and functions in the life of contemporary Mongolian communities.

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The “walking tree” in contemporary folk beliefs, narratives and rituals

Beliefs about the unusual tree are represented in various discursive and ritual forms, which vindicate and complement one other. In this article, in order to analyze some manifestations of those beliefs, I use multiple sources, encompassing oral materials (interviews conducted during my fieldwork), written materials (web materials found in internet sources) and visual materials (the observation of ritual practices during my fieldwork, photo and video materials from internet sources). Oral materials contain folk narratives of various genres and other discursive forms, including descriptions of rituals and rites (some of them exist only in a discursive form and never are performed in reality, others represent ritual practices that are realized). Internet space embodies folk beliefs in a written form, not only representing oral narratives, but also supplying it with other genres that are specific to social media, and which impact upon the development of the image and abilities of the miracle tree. The use of visual materials allows us to investigate rituals devoted to the tree, and the boundaries and links between discursive and ritual practices. They also allow us to touch upon the realm of concrete items (particular locations, real trees, the physical objects included in rituals, etc.) involved in this case of landscape mythology.

“*Im gaikhaltai id shidiin bökh mod bii...*” / “Such a wondrous miracle tree is the Bökh Mod”: these tones of mystery and surprise often determine the mode of storytelling about the tree. And, indeed, it does have many enigmatic features and semantic twists, starting from the name of this unusual tree itself. “*Bökh mod*” might be translated in a variety of ways: ‘large/solid/strong tree’ (‘*bökh*’), “leaning tree” (from ‘*bökh*’-‘*bökhiih*’), “wrestler-tree” (‘*bökh*’, in both senses, a tree of wrestlers and a tree-wrestler) (Pjurbeev 2001). Each of these meanings supplies an element of the image and abilities of the tree and refers to different folk beliefs.

In narratives, Bökh Mod is usually presented as a huge strong tree with a peculiar shape: the figure of a wrestler (“with an appearance like a human, [as] a wrestler standing in struggle” / “*khünii dürstei ijil, zodog shuudagtai bökh khün öröd*” [D.Ch., 1939, Khalkha, Bayan Ovoo sum, Bayankhongor, 2015]²), or two wrestlers (“seems like two wrestlers enfolding each other while fighting”) / “*khoyor bökh bariad zogsoj baigaa met kharagddag yum*” [B.T., 1965, Khalkha, Bayan Ovoo sum, Bayankhongor, 2015]). It might also be described as a living tree or as a dry tree, and the only stable feature of its image, that it is a pine tree.

Additionally, ‘leaning’ refers to one of the supernatural abilities the tree has, namely its ability to move. Leaning in one or other direction between two provinces, the Bökh Mod predicts and determines where a wrestler-champion will be born.³ It

² Here and further, metadata given in square brackets refer to fieldwork materials and provided in the following format: the interviewee’s initials, year of birth, their Mongolian community (e.g. Khalkha, Olot, Buryat, etc Mongolian peoples), the interview location and year.

³ Mongolian traditional wrestling is regarded as an important piece of national culture and heritage, deriving from the times of Genghis Khan, and continues to be highly respected and popular in con-

can also predict which province the wrestler destined to win in the next festival's (*naadam*) competitions will come from (Pic. 1).

[According to what people say], which one of those two provinces this tree falls towards, there good strong wrestlers will be born.

Ter mod khoyor aimgiin al' ruu n' kharj unana ter nutgaas khar'shgüi khüchtei bökhchüüd törnө гэj yar'dag baijee [B.S., 1973, khalkha, Jargalant sum, Bayankhongor, 2015].

[The tree] predicts and determines the birth of famous strong wrestlers in the neighbouring provinces. Besides this, it also predicts who will win at the competitions at the big [state] festival Naadam.

Zaag orchimd aimagt aldartai khüchtei bökh khünii törliig mergelj, nölөөлөх, түүnees гадна том наадамд кхен ялах гэj мергелдег [M.D., khalkha, 1943, Zag sum, Bayankhongor, 2015].

Moreover, the tree might even “walk” around the area between bordering provinces. The motif of the tree shifting location is accompanied in oral and written (internet) narratives with specific locations. The most frequent of these are Bulgan sum in Arkhangai province, Jargalant sum in Bayankhongor, and the border between Bulgan sum of Arkhangai and Erdenetsogt sum of Bayankhongor. The significance of the strolls of the Bökh Mod between the two provinces is once again to indicate which one the winning wrestler will come from.

The cause of such unusual behavior is another popular topic of narration. Some versions refer to the unclear and miraculous origin of the tree, testifying that it was planted by no-one simply appearing by itself [B.B., b.1973, khalkha, Ölzii sum, Bayankhongor, 2015]. Other accounts attempt to approach the mystery from ‘scientific’ and ‘natural’ perspectives. According to one such explanation, the supernatural abilities of the tree derive from the specific place it grows: an area where there is supposed to have been ancient human habitation formerly.

At that place, remains of hearth, weapons, tools, utensils, urban ruins, and bone carvings were discovered, which belong to ancient people, who lived 200 000 years ago along the rivers Orkhon, Tamir, Hanui, Hunui, and Chuluut.

Ter nutagt Orkhon, Tamir, Khanui, Khünüi, Chuluut golyn nutgaas 200 000 jiliin üed nutaglaj baisan ertnii khünii gal golomtyn üldegdel oromj, khereglej, baisan zevseg bagaj heregsel, cav suulga, khot suuriny tuur', yas chuluun siilmel zereg oldjee [G.M., 1961, Khalkha, Tsetserleg sum, Arkhangai, 2016].

temporary Mongolian communities. Traditional wrestling is one of the “Three manly skills” that also include horse racing and archery, and all together they are included in regular competitions on the national festival *Naadam*. These competitions, like the festivals, can be found at different levels starting from smaller administrative units (district *sum*, province *aimag*) and reaching up to the national state (*ulsyn*) level.

According to another version people from neighboring districts of Bayankhongor, Arkhangai and sometimes Övörkhongai provinces, steal the magical tree from the border (or the territory of neighbors to their own area) and carry it off to ensure that the winning wrestlers will come from their province. Some narratives of this kind even provide a convincing explanation of why the tree sometimes looks dry and damaged after such walks, or, on the contrary, remains green and keeps on demonstrating its supernatural qualities.

There is such a tree, Bökh Mod, in Arkhangai province. It was located on the border of Bayanhongor and Arkhangai. People from Arkhangai moved the tree closer to them, and it is still green and growing, after they took it out and put in another place. Now there are good wrestlers in Arkhangai [H., 1944, Khalkha, Bayan Ovoo, Bayankhongor].

Arkhangai aimagt baidag Bökh Mod n' Arkhangai bolon Bayanhongor aimgiin khil zaaglan orshdog bilee. Arkhangain nutgiin хүмүүс enekhүү modyg sugalj зөж авчирсны дараа ч ногоон кھےвеее ургасаар байдэг аjee. Odoо kharin Arkhangai aimagt sain bökhchүүд baidag.

The tree Bökh Mod with its supernatural abilities to move around and to predict champion wrestlers is a very popular element in contemporary narrative tradition, and occupies a prominent place in local landscape mythology and occupational folklore (that of wrestlers). Stories about it refer to both the past and the present and are retold by a variety of people, old and young, people directly related to the traditional Mongolian wrestling and those who are not.

In oral and written narratives, these motifs appear in various genres – legends devoted to local landscape items and the neighborhood or to wrestlers of former and modern times, rumors, belief narratives, and life stories where the ways of people, both outstanding and ordinary, are entwined with the fate and will of the miracle tree:

Old people used to say that wherever this tree falls, whether towards Arkhangai [or] Bayankhongor, in that area good wrestlers will be born. And the tree fell towards Arkhangai just before the ‘Lion’⁴ began to shine in Bulgan sum⁵. [So] the words of our old people were proved to be true – soon in Bulgan sum of Arkhangai province the national [champion with the rank] ‘Lion’ Munkherdene was born. That is why this [champion] ‘Lion’ is sometimes called “the wrestler of the tree-wrestler” [the Bökh mod]. This tree connected not only to that ‘Lion’ [Munkherdene], but also to other wrestlers [-champions], who appeared after him. At the end of the period when good wrestlers were not been born in Bulgan, soon after the ‘Lion’ Munkherdene, the state [champion] wrestlers ‘Elephant’ Ragchaa [and] ‘Hawk’ Batjargal were born.

⁴ Traditional Mongolian wrestling includes a range of titles, indicating the level of competitions, ranks and number of wins a wrestler has. The main corpus of titles includes such figures as (in ascending order from the lowest to the highest): ‘Falcon’, ‘Elephant’, ‘Lion’, ‘Hawk’, ‘Garuda’, ‘Giant’.

⁵ *Sum* is an administrative unit, a district of a province (*aimag*).

Ene mod Arkhangai, Bayankhongoryn khashaa n' harj unana ter nutgaas sain Bökħ törnө geĵ humuus khüürnedeg baiĵ. Getel Bulgan sumyn nutag dakh 'terkhuu mod arslangiin id gyalalzaj ekhlekhees döngөĵ ömnө Arkhangai tiish kharj unajee. Nutgiin övgөdiin yaria ch ünениi khuv 'tai baisan n' notlogdoĵ, udalgüi Arkhangai Bulgan sumaas ulsyn arslan tsoltoi törsөн n' Mönkherdene baiв. Tiimees ch arslang 'Bökħ modny Bökħ' geĵ nerleh n' bii. Ene mod zövkhөн arslанд bus tüünii араas zalgaj garsan Bökħchüüded ch bas khamaardag. Bulgan sumaas sain Bökħ töрөlgüi kheseĵ khugatsaa bolsny etsest Mönkherdene arslangiin араas ulsyn заan Ragĵhaa, ulsyn khartsaga Batjargal naryn bökħchüüd ter darui törsөн garsan yum [Ch.G., 1954, Olot, Bulgan sum, Arkhangai, 2016].

Stories also mention and describe practices connected to the Bökħ Mod. Some of these only have a textual existence (this is most likely the case for the idea of stealing and removing the tree, for instance). However, the real-life existence of others is confirmed from other sources (surveys, visual materials and observations). These include a range of actions common in Mongolian tradition to express respect toward a sacred object: circling around an object, tying ritual scarfs (*hadag*) to an object, sprinkling an object with vodka/tea/milk, leaving small offerings of food, tobacco, etc. Praying and wishing are also a part of these worship practices, and in addition to random requests about well-being, they make mention of health “strong as the tree”, physical strength, and, of course, victory in the competitions. So, besides requests about one’s own wellbeing, practices include strong “as the tree” health, physical strength, and, of course, a win in the wrestling competitions. These rituals and rites are performed by local people from neighboring areas, both wrestlers and non-wrestlers, as well as travelers from other parts of Mongolia: “Many people come to pay respect to this Bökħ Mod, which is in Bulgan sum of Arkhangai province” / “*Arkhangai aimgiin Bulgan sumand baikh enekhüü Bökħ modyg olon tumen süslen khündelseer irjee*” (FB, Aryn saikhan Khangai)⁶.

Besides such common practices, the Bökħ Mod is also associated with some quite particular rites, which are to be performed by wrestlers who “take energy (*energi*) from the tree, standing embracing it” [D.Kh., 1944, Khalkha, Bayan Ovoo sum, Bayankhongor, 2015], “put on the tree wrestling clothes”, “perform wrestling dance” [B.B., 1970, Khalkha, Jargalant sum, Bayankhongor, 2015], the ceremonial “dance of eagle”, *bürgediin develt* (Pic. 3).

As well as the written form of narratives, internet and media sources provide additional contexts for folklore phenomena to live in. The motifs we have mentioned can also be found on Facebook and Twitter, in blogs, on news and sports portals together with other materials including visuals (photos) related to Bökħ Mod. One of most typical contexts for the miracle tree on the internet today are websites of Mongolian towns and settlements. On these sites the tree is represented as a material and spiritual treasure, natural and local heritage, specific to Bayanhongor and Arhangai (<http://jargalant.khongor.gov.mn/>; <http://archive.bayankhongor.gov.mn/>

⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/tkwkw6j>.

jargalant; <http://tseegiineemi.blogspot.com/p/dm-mi-ts.html>). These materials often are reposted by private individual users who also make their own contribution by adding photos, comments, and versions of narratives. Traces of Bök Mod also might be found in sport and professional wrestling blogs, news blogs, observing local Mongolian sensations and events (fact.mn, dnn.mn, tod.hiimori.mn). The internet, besides carrying folk narratives in a written form, also provides the support by which this can evolve. For example, the conditions of communication in the internet space noticeably impact on the “anthropomorphization” of the miracle tree that already exists in oral traditions. This humanizing of the tree results from its specific appearance and supposed mobility, and is found in remarks about its current state that contain an emotional component. One such example can be found in a report about the broken hand of the tree: “Bök Mod lost its hand, [by which it was] waving and looking as a wrestler, so badly one its hand is broken :(? / “*Bök Mod garaa aldlaad devj baigaa bök shig kharagddag baisan gesen, daanch neg gar n’ khugarchikhsan* :(? (Pic. 2) (<http://saixan.blogspot.com/2016/01/blog-post.html>).

Internet sources also ascribe a great age to the Bök Mod making it older, even older than than it is in (?) oral narrative tradition. This emphasis on the antiquity of tradition serves to enhance the authenticity and reliability of the reported phenomenon:

Bök Mod is located northeast of the center of Jargalant sum, in Bayankhongor province, on the territory of the 3rd bag⁷ of Khöndlön Bulag. Before the People’s Revolution,⁸ wrestlers of the khoshuu⁹ used to go there to pray and worship [to the tree].

Bök Mod n’ Bayanhongor aimagiin Jargalt sumyn tövөөs зүүн khoish Khöndlön bulagiin 3-r bagiin nutagt orshikh ba Ardyn khuv’sgalaas ömnö khoshuuny bökchuid ochij khündetgel үзүүilen mörgөj tah’dag baisan (<http://archive.bayankhongor.gov.mn/jargalant/single/49>).

Internet data does however also reflect doubts about the miracle tree and its supposed abilities, and the testing of trust as in this excerpt of an interview with the wrestler:

– There is the ‘Böh Mod’ in Bulgan sum of Arhangai province. You probably know the legend about this tree. Do you believe it’s true?

– Almost everyone knows about the ‘Böh Mod’. If the ‘Böh Mod’ falls on Arkhangai’s side, then a good wrestler will be born there. If it falls in Bayankhongor’s direction, then a good wrestler will be born in that area, such the saying used to be. Probably, it is true as many say.

– *Arhangai aimgiin Bulgan sumand ‘Böh Mod’ gej бii. El modny domgiig ta meddeg l bailgii. Üünd kher itgedeg ve?*

– *‘Bök Mod’-ny talaar meddeggii hün barag baidaggii biz dee. ‘Bök Mod’ Arhangai tal ruu unaval tendees sain böh törnö. Tsashaa Bayanhongor зүгтее unaval ter chigiin nutgaas sain bök törnö khemeen yar’dag baisan yum бilee.*

⁷ Bag is an administrative unit of a district (*sum*).

⁸ People’s Revolution of 1921.

⁹ *Khoshuu* – a unit of administrative system in Mongolia till 1935.

Olny ug ortoi gedeg shig üneden baidag bailgüi dee (<http://www.fact.mn/81854.html>).

The internet is a special space where folk beliefs can manifest, and it can contribute additional surprises and discoveries that reveal material ‘evidences’ for the tree’s mobility and flexibility.

This data relates to the appearances and location of this tree in the form of photos, selfies with the tree(s), and short videos.¹⁰ Although they seem at times to be images of different trees, this does not create any debate or questioning among users who ‘like’ and comment on those posts as normal. Thus, the needs of narrative tradition that thrive around the core motif of supernatural mobility triumph over the ritual tradition (which usually implies some stability of sacred objects to be worshipped), and pull different landscape items together into a combined image of a wondrous tree.

The unusual and exciting story about the Bökh Mod, nevertheless, touches upon topics significant for folk culture relating to the human and the natural, the natural and the supernatural, past and contemporary images of neighborhood relations, the ties and connections between different communities, habits and values, which are in turn constructed upon important living concepts, traditional Mongolian beliefs and universal motifs. To reveal some of these basic ideas, we need to make a closer observation of the cultural ground and mythological roots of the miracle tree.

It should be mentioned that Mongolian vernacular beliefs provide a very “tree friendly” cultural environment in terms of everyday routines and attitudes toward nature. These beliefs are embodied in a general rule: a prohibition (*tseer*) on cutting trees, and narratives illustrating this near-taboo. In Mongolian traditions, the cutting of trees (together with hunting and fishing) is regarded as a grievous sin,¹¹ which dramatically affects the fate of those who do it, their family and all those who are somehow related to this deed. Numerous narratives tell about a sinful (*nügelt*) woodsman who dies in agony after cutting down trees. His family members die one after another or suffer from horrible diseases (FM 2006–2017, Damdinsüren 1991, Tsermaa 2006), and even random people, who later simply come to the deserted camp and occupy a wooden hut made from those sinfully-taken trees, fall sick and die, if they do not grasp fast enough the unluckiness of the place, and move away (Tsermaa 2006, 12).

¹⁰ There are also photographs of sacred trees in Arkhangai and Bayankhongor aimaks available in the article written by Alena Oberfalzerova, which apparently might be some of the same trees which are now associated with the image of Bökh Mod, but probably in 2010–2011, when the fieldwork of the author was conducted, this image at least was not so popular, and the trees were simply labelled “*Zuun salaa mod*, ‘a tree with a hundred branches’ (Arkhangai)” (Oberfalzerova 2012, 33, Figure 5) and “Double tree, an object of worship (Bayan-Hongor)” (Oberfalzerova 2012, 35, Figure 6).

¹¹ Restricting regulations concerning hunting and fishing in Mongolia are most certainly influenced by Buddhism, including customs such as “sealing the lands and the water” in Tibetan (and Mongolian) Buddhism, which is attested as early as the 12th century (Huber/Pedersen 1997).

Such narratives might be told about any tree (or group of trees) at any location, due to the traditional conceptualization in which they belong to local nature spirits (*lus-savdag*, *gazaryn ezen*), the patrons of Mongolian land, and very powerful and influential figures of folk authorities. The misfortunes that follow the cutting down of trees are the revenge of nature spirits, and the only counter-measure that someone who has done this can take is a (correctly-performed) special ritual of asking permission and forgiveness from the spirits.

Orphan tree

Besides this general respectful framing attitude towards all trees, there are particular kinds of trees, which require very special treatment and worship. They might be represented by groups of trees (often called *Zuun/olon modnii bayan burd* – “Oasis of hundred/many trees”). Or they might be more commonly (and more relevantly here) be a solitary tree (*önchin mod*, “orphan tree”). Typologically, the Bök Mod is one of these. While the particular species of sacred trees varies according to district, local and communal traditions (Gongorjav 2011; Lkhagvasüren 2012, 46–47), the most popular species are poplar, willow and, of course, the larch, with its symbolism of being “always green – always alive”, as is the case in many other cultures.

In Mongolian traditions, other features of such trees seem particularly significant. Solitary trees come in a variety of types, distinguished by one of their semantically important features which relates to their appearance, location and so on: a branchy tree (*zun salaa mod*, “a tree with hundred branches”), a tree growing on the top of a mountain, a tree growing on the side of the river, a tree struck by lightning, a crooked tree. The unusual shapes and locations of these trees (together with their proud solitude) can be taken as markers of their special status. This means they possess a stronger degree of supernatural patronage on one hand, and on the other that their own special abilities are greater. Such trees are often regarded as wrathful (“*dokshit*”), which obliges people to behave more cautiously when in their vicinity, and to follow special rules, including restrictions on climbing the tree, coming too close to it, stepping on its roots (or even on its shadow), making a noise, sleeping next to a tree, etc. (Oberfalzerova 2012; Gruntov 2018; Lkhagvasüren 2012).

In former times, the worship of such trees had both an occasional and a regular (seasonal) dimension, which nowadays is undergoing somewhat of a revival in the modified forms of annual festivals (Heichieva 2017). Today, occasional forms of worship are more popular, and in general they are similar with those discussed above, representing a basic complex of rites quite common for sacred places and objects in general. These are, for example, offerings with food, sprinkling, binding *hadak*, circling around the trees.¹² Usually such trees do not have any strict “professional”

¹² The worship of this kind of trees among Mongolian peoples has a long history and traces of it are found in various sources including “The secret history of Mongols” (*Mongyol-un niyuca tobca’an*, a chronicle written in the 13th century, the most important and oldest medieval Mongolian text): “nine sprinklings for the branchy tree” (Mongolyn 1957, 117).

specializations in the way the wrestling tree does, and become instead the addressees of common prayers for wellbeing, good luck, and fertility (especially those trees with “hundred branches”) and of wishing. Together with other sacred natural objects, including rocks and springs, such places are regarded as healing places. In contemporary local folklore, such trees are popular figures associated with travel, belief narrative, local landscape mythology (all genres which now are found in cyberspace), and also of more ‘conservative’ genres such as old legends of communal origins and ritual poetry (Dampilova 2012).

These solitary trees also have another united name in Mongolian culture which applies in other ritual and mythological contexts, “*udagan mod*”¹³ (‘a tree of a female shaman’): “Shamans worship to *udagan mod*. A branchy tree growing alone is called “*udagan mod*” / “*Böö nar udagan mod shütdeg. Ontsgoi uragsan saglagar modyg udagan mod gedeg*” [J.P., 1922, Khalkha, Bulgan (town), Bulgan, 2007]. In both earlier and contemporary traditions, this name might be used in two senses. Firstly, it could be used as a category term for all solitary sacred trees, and secondly, it could be used as a specific concept which involves the tree as a symbolic mythological image and as a material ritual object (Dampilova 2012, 203–204). In the second sense, the tree is linked to various kinds of practices,¹⁴ including invocatory rituals, where it is represented as a part of the equipment that a shaman(ness) needs for travelling between worlds. In this context, solitary trees are regarded to be “spots of the connection between earth and sky” (Dampilova 2012, 116), the human and other worlds, of supreme deities, spirits and demons (Dampilova 2012, 134). Thus, it is that orphan trees reveal themselves to be forms of the world tree (or the tree of life), one of the most widespread mythological figures (Honko 1986).¹⁵

World tree

These models of the world tree, sacred kin and ritual tree in Mongolian actual and ritual mythology retain traces of some substantial influence from and close

¹³ The term ‘*udagan mod*’ has synonymous names in Mongolian traditions: ‘*eej mod*’, popular among Buryats (Dampilova 2012, 104), ‘*gurvān tīviiin böö mod*’, ‘*böö mod*’ among Darkhads, the last one is recognized as a late term (Lkhagvasuren 2012, 48), which recently started to spread more widely. The long debate on the origin and semantical ties of ‘*udagan mod*’ still continues (Dampilova 2012, 161–162). According to some interpretations, ‘*udagan*’/‘*idurγan*’ is connected with the Turkic *ot/ut* ‘fire’ (Tsybikov 1981, 167) or old Turkic *īduq* ‘sacred’ (Rassadin 2007, 64–65). However one of the most popular previous and contemporary opinions (such as Banzarov 1955, Mihailov 1996, Lkhagvasuren 2012, Oberfalzerova 2012) proposes a connection with *etiügen*, the old name for ‘earth’ (mentioned in the “Secret History of the Mongols”), which is involved in various mythological and religious texts, and which correlates with the semantically important ties between images of the sacred tree and the mythological ancestress – earth, mother-*eej*, emphasizing their feminine nature and fertility.

¹⁴ There are various ritual and rites mostly connected to shamanic practices including traditions of initiations [Galdanova 1996], invocations (Dampilova 2012) and funerals (Hangalov 1959, 270).

¹⁵ It seems to be no accident that in the modern tradition, the combination ‘*böh mod*’ is consistently used to translate the Christian concept associated with the image of a mighty tree growing by the water side (for the possible prototype see Jeremiah 17:8), which also correlates with the regarding image, see <https://tinyurl.com/yxyn8to8>.

ties with other mythological and genre traditions. This concerns motifs of the world tree, which arrived together with Buddhist cosmology and cosmography (Kovalevskii 1837). These concepts were also widely adopted in Mongolian epic traditions,¹⁶ which were closely connected to local beliefs and apparently had a strong impact upon the interactions of the motifs from Buddhist mythology and local autochthonous traditions. Such motifs include mythological trees, which are grown in isolation, sometimes at the side (or in the middle) of the mythological world ocean (or sea), growing at the line where sky and earth meet. They permeate several levels of the universe and cover 75 heavens, possess leaves which emit beautiful music, and are endowed with miraculous abilities to fulfill desires, drive away evil spirits and demons, heal sickness and revive the dead (Neklyudov 1980; Mitirov 1980; Basangova 2015). Among these trees are *Galbar zandan* (also *Damba Zuli*, *Dalai Damba*, *Zamba*), the fiery-red sandalwood tree (which has healing leaves and grows up from the lower world); *Galbirragsha* (*kalpavrksa*), the tree which exists for as long as the entire kalpa (aeon); the giant king-of-trees called ‘Sala’ (compare with *zuun sala mod*), which grows on *Jambudvīpa*; the giant tree, that grows on the other side of the outer ocean and which holds the nest of the highly-beloved Buddhist deity Khan Garuda (the king of birds) (Neklyudov 1980, 101). The fairytale tradition draws more intensively upon the image of a miracle tree, giving it specific generic features, evoking the images of “a solitary tree, hiding at its roots a miracle talisman”, or “a faraway tree with sixty (seventy) branches, belonging to people who speak sixty (seventy) languages” (Neklyudov 1980, 101).

Thus, our miracle walking tree is an orphan tree, a ‘shamanic’ tree, and a world tree. The narrative tradition devoted to this tree includes motifs referring to the past, present and future. It unites different times, as, according to the stories, it spread its rootedness in the camp of ancient mankind, it nourishes contemporary people with healing ‘energy’ and by listening to their wishes and prayers, and it predicts the birth and fame of a special kind of people: traditional wrestlers.

Heroic tree

Besides these images of the world tree, various traditional narrative genres reveal some other important ties and contexts regarding the Bök Mod. These share a number of common images, characters and motifs, concerning natural objects, especially stones and trees. Such motifs display the intricate relations pertaining between representatives of the (super-)human and the (super-)natural. Fairy-tale narratives give vivid examples of such unity, embodied in various international manifestations of ‘the living tree’ (as found in tale-types ATU 720 *The Juniper Tree*, and ATU 780 *The Singing Bone*) as a receptacle for the soul of the positive human character, whose life was cruelly interrupted by the antagonist; or as an analogue of the human body

¹⁶ In epic tradition, besides functional images, the world tree is often included at the formal beginning of a story, which mentions the epic time when the world tree was ‘a tender sprout’ and when the world ocean was ‘a small puddle’ (Neklyudov 1980, 101).

which starts to bleed with ‘real’ blood when felled;¹⁷ or as partial soul of the human character, reflecting his or her life conditions: blossoming while happy, and becoming parched when the character is close to death. This motif typically features in narratives about several brothers (or friends) who separate to search for their fate and fortune, such as in the following fieldwork example:

- So, seven sons had to go for seven years. So, they planted seven trees.
 - If someone is in trouble, his tree will grow weak and collapse, [they] said.
 Then seven years passed, the tree of the fool [brother] grew weak and collapsed.
 [They] asked the magician [brother], and he said:
 - [The fool brother] is lying pressed under a flat black rock.

Ingeed doloон hüü doloон jil yavakh boljee.

Ingeed ted doloон mod bosgojee.

- *Khen neg n' muu yavbal tүүnii mod khösrii bolj khugarsan baina gejee.*

Tegeed doloон jil bolood irtel tenegiin mod khösrii bolood khugarsan baiv gene.

Ilbechnees asuutal:

- *Khavtgai khar khadni door daraastai baina gejee.*

[J.Ts., 1926, Khalkha, Khujirt sum, Övörkhangai, 2006].

While both ‘high’ mythology and fairy-tale traditions form a solid background of hidden semantics and expressive images, epic and legend traditions also make their own significant contributions to Mongolian landscape mythology, which is more closely related to the communal everyday life beliefs and practices. In the epic tradition, the hero often might be born from (or found in) a rock or at the roots of a giant tree (Basangova 2015, Khan Kharangui tuul’ 2016). Sometimes the hero himself is metaphorically described as a solitary sprout, a lonely branch meaning a lonely soul (Basangova 2015). In legends, the motif of kinship with a tree is represented in genealogical narratives devoted to the origin of particular Mongolian groups (Lkhagvasüren 2012, 46–47, 50; Dampilova 2012, 118, 213–214), and supported by ritual practices (taboos and worship prescriptions towards the totemic tree) (Gongorjav 2011, Lkhagvasüren 2012, Gruntov 2016).

A reversed account of the relations between heroes and natural objects can be found where features in the landscape owe their existence, location and peculiar shapes to superhuman characters and their deeds. A large number of such examples includes mountains which were the pillows of epic heroes or tethering post for their horses, large solitary stones in the steppe, which were the tops of mountains and rocks brought by heroes (*baatarchuud* or *bökhchүүд*) in order to defeat a giant snake (*avarga mogoi* and *Taikhar chuluu*), to block enemies or curses (*kharaal*), and large trees of peculiar shape, which were split and twisted by heroes, etc. [FM 2015–2016].

A noteworthy trait of landscape narratives is that the heroic character might be represented synonymously by various figures believed to have “superhuman”

¹⁷ This motif is popular in legends and in the contemporary ‘new age’ narrative traditions.

abilities: mythological ancestors, epic heroes, religious specialists, and traditional wrestlers. In contemporary landscape mythology, though from different genres these characters carry the same determining roles, i.e. to be protectors and benefactors of the home land (*nutag*), to defenders of the area and its inhabitants against various kinds of evil and malevolence, and provider of fame and well-being.¹⁸

While the presence of heroes is mostly referred to in various narrated forms of the past (myth, epic, or recent historical time), natural objects serve as their ‘here and now’ representations. They are material proofs of their abilities and receptacles of their sacred power. The notion of intimate, interpenetrating ties existing between a person and his or her material objects (Humphrey 2002) is also one of the widespread motifs found around the world (perhaps a cultural universal), represented in various spheres of traditional and modern life, folklore, religion (starting from beliefs, from black magic to saints’ relics). In Mongolian traditions, the situation of sacred patronage and positive influence transmitted from superhuman figures to material objects (or even through material objects to the community of presently living people) is often described and interpreted by the emic concept *khiimor*.¹⁹

In this context, the term has a spectrum of meanings including vital power and spiritual strength. According to Mongolian vernacular beliefs, the level of *khiimor* determines the quality of life, well-being, fortune and happiness, and also individual abilities. For ordinary people, a (normal) medium level is indicated by good health and life conditions, while a low level is shown by the occurrence of diseases, failure, and misfortune (Tsermaa 2006, 21; Damdinsüren 1991, 18). Extraordinary people are supposed to have a high level of *khiimor*, the higher and the more outstanding abilities they have, and to spread their excess of blessing upon the land and people around them [D.Kh., 1944, Khalkha, Bayan Ovoo sum, Bayankhongor, 2015].

Traditional wrestlers are one of the most popular categories of people who are believed to have such very high *khiimor*, together with a high social and spiritual status. This is due to the special abilities and benefits they bring to their local home-communities: protecting, glorifying, raising the prestige of the area (settlement,

¹⁸ Concurrent narrative and ritual traditions suggest that sacred natural objects often are found under the double jurisdiction and protection of contemporary nature spirits *lus-savdag* and now-deceased heroes.

¹⁹ *Khiimor* is a highly complex term with multiple semantics and functions in Mongolian vernacular traditions as well as oral and ritual practices. It encompasses the mythological and Buddhist religious symbol of ‘the horse-wind’, ‘vital energy’, ‘strengths’, ‘happiness’ (*az hiimor*), ‘good luck’, etc. It might be also applied to humans (personally and collectively), supernatural entities, animate creatures (for example, wolves who are believed to have high *hiimor*), and inanimate natural objects (such as sacred mountains, trees, and springs), manufactured items (*morin khuur*), and personal belongings. In different contexts, it might refer to various dimensions including religious, traditional medical, social (in particular, gender, when *khiimor* is regarded as a symbol of masculinity), and mythological. According to one of popular motifs specific for the folklore of wrestlers, the wolf gives birth and lives in the chest of a great deceased wrestler, which is also a sign of high *khiimor* and the superhuman nature of the hero [FM 2009-2016]. On *khiimor* see also the research of Katherine Swancutt (2012).

sum, aimag), *nutag*, where they were born.²⁰ In the Mongolian world, the cult of wrestlers has deeper traditional features and sacred meanings as is reflected in beliefs, narratives, and ritual practices. Traditional wrestlers (*bökhchүүд*) are regarded as the heroes of contemporary times, modern descendants of the epic heroes (*baatarчууд*). This belief is represented in various motifs, including the notion that the body of epic heroes and wrestlers share common features, such as ribs that have no spaces between them. This is a symbol of supernatural nature and strength (the same feature sometimes is spread upon the best friend of the hero – his horse):

“[...] then people came back and [saw that] inside the chest [the skeleton of the deceased wrestler] a wolf gave birth to its cubs [and made a shelter for them there]. That person [a wrestler] had a physical peculiarity: there are ribs, his ribs lacked any spaces in-between. Some flesh should be here [the interviewee is pointing on his own ribs], there was no flesh, it was just solid bone, monolithic bone /

“[...] *tegeed ter khümüüs ergeed ochikhod tseejniikhen khöndii hödnii dotor chono gölögлösөн байсан гэж яар’dag, tegeer ter khünii bieiin ontslog yuu ve gekheer khavirga baina shүү dee, khavirganүүд n’khoodondoo zai baikhgüi, end n’ makh baidag te, makh baikhgüi, tsul yas baisan bitүү yas* [B., 1973, Khalkha, Ölziit sum, Bayankhomgor, 2015].

Besides their outstanding physical strength and super-human power as represented in various motifs in legends, they also have peculiar spiritual abilities, such as being able to “sanctify” the space where they present, to scare away all bad and malevolent influences, and to fight and crush evil spirits and demons [N.S, 1926, Khalkha, Bömbögör sum, Bayankhomgor, 2015]. This last motif (and some other related motifs) are similar to ideas about the abilities of religious specialists, and in some narratives, wrestlers even combine these duties, being at one and the same time a wrestler and a shaman or lama [B., 1973, Khalkha, Ölziit sum, Bayankhomgor, 2015].

Portions of ‘excess’ *khiiomor’* and positive power are believed to be contained in various items related to a great wrestler. Besides the aforementioned pieces of landscape, such items include a wrestler’s clothes, his hat and belt,²¹ and also his physical remains: the bones of a deceased wrestler.²² All these objects are regarded as

²⁰ The pair *böh – nutag* is a vivid representation of traditional concept of the spiritual unity between the human and the territorial, which has different forms and objectivations in rituals, such as the practice of burying the umbilical cord after the birth in the house space, to give one example. In the folklore of wrestlers, the idea of this connection is reflected in practices addressing the spirits (*lus-savdag*) and patrons (*sakhius*) of the birthplace for the help and support before the battle. In return, after the competition the winner perform the ceremonial dance facing (offering it) the direction of motherland [FM 2014-2016].

²¹ Both objects are believed to be closely connected to a person, accumulating the *hiimor’* and *sul’d* of the owner. This especially concerns the belt which, as a masculine attribute, scares away demons and all evil.

²² Beliefs about the special ability of bones to contain the features and abilities of their owners are widespread and found in various cultures. In Mongolian traditions, these beliefs are connected to various motifs and figures, both demonic (the demon *chötgör* and “bad soul” *muu süns* are believed to be connected to the pelvic and skull bones) and sacred. The most important sacred figure is the guarantor and patron of the entire Mongolian land, Genghis Khan. This is reflected in repeating declamations and rumors about the discovery of the secret burial place (together with multiple folk locations of the place of birth) of the great khan in different places both inside and outside of Mongolia (on the mythic

sacred, valuable and desirable, as long as they keep spreading their salutary influence upon the people and the place where they are situated (Gruntov 2016). In addition to a generally positive effect, such objects also have a specialized ability to provide new good wrestlers.

While natural objects usually represent immovable sacred goods (large rocks, trees, etc – only a hero can move them and thus can define his strength and willpower), a wrestler himself, and his belongings represent a mobile sacred good. This understanding is richly reflected in narrative traditions and embodied in various motifs. One of the more popular narratives tells of the wrestler who is offended by people from his home-community, and, despite close ties with the mother-land, has to leave it. Following this, wrestlers are no longer born in that place, but start to be born in the area the wrestler moves to [O.B., 1963, Myangad, Kshovd, 2014]. In legends and descriptions of real practices, wrestlers' clothes might be passed on by the owner himself to another person so as to share *khiimor*, the strength and luck in competitions (for example, from the wrestler-teacher to his disciple). They might also be stolen by others who want to get their own wrestler-winners. A similar situation concerns the remains of deceased great wrestlers – their location determines the place where good wrestlers will be born. The theft of the bones of a great wrestler is a very popular motif known all over Mongolia, and it seems to be difficult to say whether the practice is real or not. Below one of many examples of this plot, connected to the name of a famous and very respected wrestler of former time, Vandan from Ikh tamir sum:

About 70-80 kilometres below Ikh Tamir sum, if one goes directly following the river, there will be a sum called Bettengel, a 'Giant' [champion wrestler] called Vandan was from there. When he died, Mongolian people put him, as it is supposed to be done, on the ground, on the [top of] mountain.²³ Until today this tradition [of funerals] exists, [and] according to the rules, the place [where the body of deceased will be left] should be chosen by consulting Buddhist books. People from his area put [his body there], then 21 or 49 days later, after the death on the 21st or 49th day, people usually return [to the place of funerals]. [They come] to check, what is happening to [the body of deceased] person: is it taken by sky animals, vultures, or by wolves, for this purpose [they] come

area of Chingissid, which includes, for example, Kazakhstan). Another group of motifs about sacred bones includes relics of famous wrestlers and also bones of fast horses, which are also believed to bring *hiimor* to their owners and land.

²³ The most widespread form of traditional funeral was 'leaving in the steppe', which meant that the body of the deceased would be left in the steppe at a place prescribed by a lama through divination. In some special cases, the remains were supposed to be left in a high place, such as the top of a mountain, hill, etc. In contemporary traditions, these special cases typically include the remains of famous wrestlers-champions and the skulls of speedy horses who have won races (the skulls of such horses are often located on tops of *oboo*, rocks and even trees). According to folk beliefs, doing this pays respect to the significant figures of the community and provides them with the possibility of being reborn in the same area again: "The skull of a good fast horse, racing champion should be located at a good high place, facing the area, where it was born and lived, so it would reborn here, at its motherland again" / *Sain moriig nutagluuldag zanshil yosoor khurdan khülgiin tolgoig gavlyn yasyg törj össön nutag ruu n' kharuulj tav'snaar törsön nutagtaa dakhin törnö gej belegsheedeg bilee [Kh.B., 1963, Khalkha, Ölziit sum, Bayankhomgor, 2015].*

to check after 21 days.²⁴ So, [they] came on the 21st day – [there were only] bones left, [they] came on the 49th day – the bones had vanished. Finally, it was discovered why those [bones] disappeared: they were moved to another place, people from another province took bones of the wrestler and buried it once again [at their area]. [...]. The reason why they did it is that their province was very poor in wrestlers, ‘Giants’ [champions] were not born there, [that is why they] took bones of Vandan ‘Giant’ to their place, worshipped it, buried it again on the high place on the top of the mountain. They did not tell anything to people from [Vandan’s] area, they [just] came back secretly. [...]. After they worshipped the [stolen] bones of that wrestler, three ‘giants’ were born in their province, one after another.

Ikh tamir sumaas 70-80 kilometr orchim door yag goloo dagaad yavkhaar Bettsengel gej bii, ter sumyn khar'yat Vandan gedeg avarga khün baisan. Tegeed ter nas baraad, tegeed teriig mongolchuud chini gazar il tavchikhdag uulan deer zagtai odoo ch gesen baigaa shüü dee, tiim yos bol kheveree burkhany nom khardaad il tav'gevel il l tavchikhna. Ter nutgiinkhan il tav'san tegeed yaakhav odoo esvel 21 khonood odoo nas barsnaas khoish 21 khonono 49 khonog deer n' ochij ergedeg baigüi yuu? Nöggöö khün chin' yamarkhuu baina khir zereg yaaj tengeriin am'tan tas shuvuu teriig avch yavj uu ügüi yuu esvel chono avch uu ügüi yuu gesen, tiim badlaar ochij khardag 21 ödriin daraa. Tegeed 21 khonog deer n' ochikhod yas n' baisan aa, 49 khonog deer n' ochikhod baikhgüi boloson baisan, an tegsen chin'süüld n' ingeed ter yaagad alga bolchikhov geed survaljlaad baisan chin' öör gazar luu shiljүүлsen baisan öör aimgiin khümüüs bökhiiin yasyg avaad akhiad orshuulsan baisan. [...]. Ted yaagaad ve gekheer ted nar bökh muutai aimag avarga tördөггüi aimag tegeed ter Vandan avargyn yasyg tiish n' avaachaad shüteed öndör uulyn oroi deer dakhiad orshuulsan baihgüi yuu, tegeed terniigee khümüüst khelekhgüi nuutsaar ochij ergedeg baisan. [...]. Tegeed ter böhiin yasyg dahin shütsenees khoish ter aimag zövhön neg golyn daguu 3 avarga törsön [B., 1973, Khalkha, Ölziit sum, Bayankhomgor, 2015].

The worship of traditional wrestlers is another essential facet of the Bökh Mod, but in comparison with usual items of landscape mythology, even from the same provinces, it has a different position and role. It is not a receptacle of the heroic extended blessing in narratives and practices, it is a mobile sacred good with its own will; in a way it gives birth to good wrestlers, like an epic tree, and determines the winners. It is an independent character with strong ‘personal’ features, behaving more like a wrestler, than a tree of wrestlers.

In this context, the significant textual and ritual humanization of the miracle tree becomes more meaningful, semantically justified and functional. During the aforementioned special rites performed by worshipping wrestlers, the tree is ‘dressed’ in wrestling clothes, as if one of them, in order to share the blessing with the other

²⁴ According to the interviewees, the vanishing of the body, which is part of the funeral, is a sign of the soul leaving this world, and the way it happens shows how the process is going. If the flesh of the body disappears quickly, then the soul will be reborn more easily and sooner, whereas if it stays untouched for a long time, then the soul cannot leave, and there is a problem that requires help from a religious specialist.

wrestlers (like a wrestler-teacher and his disciple), or is pulled into the ceremonial wrestlers' dance, as an equal (but still a bit superior) partner of wrestlers. The tree walks around and its 'body' (alive, or dry like the bones of deceased wrestler that is believed to be stolen and carried between the neighboring areas) brings sacral power and good luck, as well as new protectors and providers of the well-being for the land: wrestler-champions.

Thus, the miracle tree Bökḥ mod combines traditional motifs both of femininity and fertility (the world tree, the tree of a shamaness), on the one hand, and of masculinity and heroics, on the other.

Conclusion: The miracle tree in a social dimension of landscape mythology

The Bökḥ Mod, rooted in a diverse ground of mythology, folklore, and vernacular beliefs, is also thriving successfully in the social dimension, reflecting some important features of contemporary Mongolian communities and their life. It indicates non-obvious connections and relations (*kharltsaa*) within and between various groups based on the continuity and transformation of concepts, and referring to important traditional values, like *khiimor*' and *nutag*. Through motifs of an expanded spiritual good (*khiimor*') and the forms of its transmission, this case also reveals the ties between the individual, the collective and the territorial (heroic figure – community – small mother land, *nutag*), the human and the nonhuman (wrestlers – objects), the natural and the supernatural (landscape items – venerated locus), and the spiritual and the material (sacred objects).

The miracle tree is a significant figure in the local landscape mythology of several provinces and represents a particular case of the shared, mobile spiritual treasure, migrating around the boundaries of these areas. In particular this fact of folklore indicates closely-related and continuous interactions over the long term and also the unity of these traditions despite their administrative division into different provinces, as reflected in their shared sacral images and motifs.

In Mongolian culture, the natural sacred locus (together with *oboo*) serves multiple roles, being markers of areal, social, ethnic, religious, professional communities, and material representations of certain folk beliefs, memories and values. Nowadays they are also actively implicated in the construction of local identity and the building up of the brand image of a particular area (*nutag*) and community. In the relevant region, the cult of wrestlers is one of defining leitmotifs, revealing the social nature of the traditional concept *khiimor*' , turning in this context into a form of collective prestige.

The miraculous walking tree detects Mongolian folk perceptions of a unity between individual and collective, human and environmental, natural and supernatural, determined by belonging to the same home area (*nutag*). Bökḥ Mod is a case of 'landscape mythology', a term which allows to analyze this unity, bringing together perspectives of social relations, place-lore and mythic imagination, involved in the actual life of nowadays communities.

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Illustrations



1. Bökh Mod in Arkhangai province
Photo by Bat Erdene

https://twitter.com/tsbat_IT/status/513656079259938816/photo/1



2. Bök Mod with a broken hand
<http://saixan.blogspot.com/2016/01/blog-post.html>



3. A traditional Mongolian wrestler performing
the ceremonial “dance of eagle”
<https://www.facebook.com/MGLNationalWrestling/>