

In the hollow of the *taiga*: sacred Buddhist landscapes in the Darxad Depression of Northern Mongolia

Morten A. Pedersen

Based on 17 months of doctoral fieldwork among Darxad hunters and pastoralists in the Darxad Depression of Northern Mongolia, my central proposition in this paper is that this environment constitutes a total cognitive form from within which Darxad social life is imagined. The crux of my argument is that the highly explicit contrast between steppe and *taiga* zones in the Darxad Depression is perceived in the form of an asymmetrical opposition between a homogeneous centre and a heterogeneous margin, and that this opposition between a “singular centre” and a “multiple margin” is replicated across a range of different aspects of Darxad social life. Notably, the Darxads perceive themselves to consist of two different “sides”, a Buddhist “yellow side” (*shar tal*) and a shamanic “black side” (*xar tal*), and these two aspects of Darxad personhood are homologous to the asymmetrical environmental contrast in question. Following Gell, the *taiga* thus emerges as an external objectification of the Darxads’ “black side”, and the steppe as an external “objectification” of the Darxads’ “yellow side”. Darxad shamans, for example, appear as asymmetrical eversions of prominent Darxad elders. Evidently, both kinds of leaders are personifications of what all the Darxads supposedly contain “inside”, but if the prominent elder man personifies the Darxad’s “yellow side” by embodying the absolute centre in the form of a person, then the shaman rather personifies the Darxad’s “black side” in the form of the multiple *taiga* as instantiated within.

The salience of the aforementioned environmental contrast undoubtedly is related to the fact that the Mongolian Buddhist church never managed to eliminate the shamanist religion from the Darxad Depression. To be true, the ecclesiastical office (*shabi yamen*) of the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu clearly sought to render the Darxad steppe zone into a mandala-like whole by virtue of a variety of politico-religious interventions, such as the strategic construction of monasteries in this environment. But the point is that this pre-revolutionary Buddhist “domestication” project only had the effect of pushing the Darxad shamans and their domains of activity towards the *taiga* zone. For instance, most shamanic spirits (*ongon*) are understood to have their abodes in the *taiga* zone, where, on the other hand, the steppe zone is dominated by Buddhicised spiritual entities. It is, then, unquestionable that the Darxad concept of the “yellow side” is related to the pre-revolutionary establishment of the Buddhist church within the Xotgor. Yet, according to the Darxads’ own understanding, the situation back then was a different one. It was not just that the Darxads asked to be “protected” by the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu. It was also that the Mongolian Buddhist church was attracted to the Darxads and to their landscape. Indeed, from the point of view of certain Darxad narratives, the Buddhist church did not bring in anything new to their land; the church only brought out something that was already there. The Darxad and their land were not made “yellow” by the Buddhist church, for they were

“yellow” already. Rather, the Darxads’ “yellowness” only needed to be extracted by someone who could sense this attraction, and who had the capacity to make it visible. Invariably, in the narratives I have heard, this “someone” was the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu.