



## Social and Cultural Significances of Waters in Mongolia

by Ines Stolpe

Water scarcity has always contributed to shaping the socio-cultural sphere of Mongolia, a landlocked country in the vast Eurasian steppe eco-region, bordering semi-arid and arid areas of the Gobi desert. Mongolia is the least densely populated state in the world with the largest contiguous common grasslands. Until not so long ago, the majority of the Mongolian population were leading a nomadic way of life. While surface water is mostly available in the northern parts of the country, people and livestock in the southern parts depend on groundwater resources. The ways in which water has always had a connecting quality are recognisable in the common notion of “people of one water” (neg usnykhan), which refers to groups of mobile pastoralists who share a body of water.



Well shared by nomadic pastoralists in a semi-arid area



Watering herds in a lake shared by people in a large steppe area

Over the last decades, the availability of clean water has become a matter of concern. Climate change, over-grazing caused by profit-seeking priorities, and most of all mining (industrial as well as artisanal mining) cause rivers and lakes to dry up and contribute to the contamination and an increasing desertification of arid land. Competing interests in water use have led to the mobilisation of grassroots activists, which have become internationally known as Mongolia’s River Movements.<sup>1</sup> These groups of translocal civil society actors, advocating the rights of “people of one water” (neg usnykhan), have made the conflicts between the logic of extraterritorial business interests and community-based ethics regarding water visible. They have also built up connections with transnational solidarity networks such as Rivers without Boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Their collective struggle, using diverse forms of protest to protect the waters and to ensure the livelihoods of nomadic

1 Dalaibuyan Byambajav (2015): The River Movements’ Struggle in Mongolia. In: Social Movement Studies, 14:1, DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2013.877387, S. 92-97.

2 <http://www.transrivers.org>.

pastoralists, has finally led to the approval of the law “To prohibit mineral exploration and mining operations at headwaters of rivers, protected zones of water reservoirs” (colloquially known as “the law with the long name”), which was passed by the Mongolian parliament in 2009. Notwithstanding that protecting the “motherland” (ekh oron) is a proclaimed aim of leading politicians as a part of popular notions of Mongolness, law enforcement has always been an issue since market liberalisation took over.

Mongolia’s pastoralists have undergone drastic changes since the former socialist country was downgraded from “Second World” to “Third World” in the 1990s, thus being discursively moved from what used to be the “East” into the “Global South”. Only since the so-called transition to democracy have nomadic herders faced structural discrimination, which has contributed to increasing rural-to-urban migration. Due to a rapid urbanisation since the end of socialism, half of Mongolia’s population of a little over three million people are now living in the capital, Ulaanbaatar. The majority of the city’s inhabitants, especially rural-to-urban migrants, live in the outskirts in ger-districts, large settlements featuring the traditional mobile Mongolian dwelling ger, and lacking central water supply or sewage systems. Households have to fetch their water in jerrycans from water kiosks, a task that is mostly performed by children, who bear the brunt even in the freezing cold of the long winters. Households who share water kiosks, wells or water-tank lorries as connecting points, however, do not consider themselves to be “people of one water” in the urban sphere.



Children with jerrycans in a ger-district in Ulaanbaatar



Water kiosk in a ger-district in Ulaanbaatar



Water lorries filling up a water kiosk in a ger-district in Ulaanbaatar

Especially in the context of sustainability discourses, the state of Mongolia uses her nomadic traditions to display an image of outstanding environmental awareness. Nevertheless, the cultural significance of water has been quite ambiguous throughout history. At the time of the Mongol Empire, the largest contiguous imperium in history, routes of conquest had to be aligned with water sources for the nomadic conquerors and their accompanying livestock. This further extends to matters of customs and traditions. The still popular Mongolian proverb “Once I drink their waters, I follow their customs” (Usy ni uval yosy ni dagana) refers to an interesting peculiarity: In contrast to other conquerors, the Mongols did not try to impose either their way of life or their beliefs on the population in the conquered territories. Other allegorical frameworks in connection to water refer to the sea or the ocean (tengis/dalai), which are associated with endlessness and depth: Chinggis Khaan was seen as a ruler whose power and wisdom were tantamount to the endlessness and depth of the sea, and the title Dalai Lama was created by the Mongolian prince Altan Khan and first bestowed on the Tibetan monk and teacher Sonam Gyatso in 1578, associating his wisdom with the endlessness of the ocean. A more unique and perhaps surprising cultural significance is the traditional association of water not being a purifying but actually a polluting element. Until this day, it is taboo to pour water into milk for water is assigned the colour black, representing evil, while milk is considered the epitome of purity and should therefore triumph symbolically over the water. But if somebody feels hurt due to being treated with mistrustfulness for no reason, the person can disembarass herself by pouring water into milk and then sprinkling this mixture towards the offender, emblematising that (s)he spoiled the relationship by behaving as if pouring water onto good intentions as pure as milk. When modern concepts of hygiene were introduced from the 1920s, using water for washing caused scepticism, for it was feared that felicity, grace and good fortune would be washed away (buyan khishgee ugaakh). In the modern era, as hygiene is no longer a dubious matter, Mongolians in the countryside have developed creative ways to comply with hygienic needs in the face of water scarcity in the steppelands.



Bathroom with mobile water taps for a teachers' seminar held at a rural school

The symbolic link between water and the colour black has another interesting connotation in connection to Mongolian toponyms: Many bodies of water carry the name 'Black Lake' (Khar Nuur) or 'Black Water Lake' (Khar Us Nuur), which refers to clarity and the absence of salt, i.e. all lakes with those names are freshwater lakes. Finally, even though in the pre-socialist past water was neither seen in connection with purity nor used as a means for cleaning, the healing potential of medicinal springs (arshaan) has always been highly appreciated. Drinking from and/or diving into their waters (biye arshaalakh) was and is still done to cure illnesses or to attain good health, but is not associated with profane washing. Most bodies of water are worshipped and considered by believers to be inhabited by the *lus*, the masters of water. These aquatic beings are worshipped and seen as environmental protectors with the power to punish any pollution of waters by provoking disasters.



Well in a forest steppeland area with light blue khadags to worship the masters of the place

In conclusion, while Mongolia's governments (as well as the tourist industry) take pleasure in promoting the image of the country as "truly nomadic" and eco-friendly vis-à-vis foreigners, actual support for nomadic pastoralists and protection of their livelihoods, including bodies of water, frequently fall victim to greed for profit and/or the carelessness of city dwellers.