

Chapter Seven
At Home Away from Homes:
Navigating the Taiga in Northern
Mongolia

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Introduction

Deleuze and Guattari, in their essay 'On Nomadology', suggest that 'even though the nomadic trajectory may follow trails or customary routes, it does not fulfil the function of the sedentary road, which is to parcel out a closed space to people'. Rather, they argue, 'the nomadic trajectory does the opposite: it distributes people (or animals) in an open space, one that is indefinite' (1999, emphases omitted). While it should be remembered that Deleuze and Guattari's work represents an attempt to develop new philosophical concepts rather than anthropological ones - indeed, their reading of the ethnographic literature on nomads is rather dubious (Pedersen 2007a) - it is striking how well their concepts of nomadic space resonate with how some nomads in present-day Mongolia perceive and navigate within their environment. Based on fieldwork among the reindeer-breeding Duxa of northern Mongolia, this paper contends that the Duxa landscape can be described as 'nomadic', as opposed to the 'sedentary' landscape of, say, contemporary Euro-Western agriculturists. People whose landscape is nomadic, I propose, tend to highlight places at the expense of spaces, whereas people whose landscape is sedentary tend to highlight spaces at the expense of places, for, whereas sedentary landscapes are perceived as largely homogeneous and bounded, nomadic landscapes are perceived as largely heterogeneous and infinite.

1. The present chapter is a shortened and substantially rewritten version of Pedersen (2003). I thank Peter Kirby for his encouragement as well as his insightful comments. My 1995–96 fieldwork among the Duxa was supported by HM Queen Margrethe and Prince Henrik's Foundation, by King Christian X's Foundation, by Mindefondet, and by the University of Aarhus. Subsequent fieldwork among the neighbouring Darxads was carried out between June 1998 and October 1999 as well as during the summer of 2000, and was funded by the Danish Research Academy, by the William Wyse Foundation, and by King's College, Cambridge.

This is not to say that Duxa nomads and Euro-Western agriculturists live in radically different worlds. Nomadic and sedentary landscapes are not the result of two different cultures constructing their own natures (cf. Ingold 1993). Rather, I argue, the marked differences between the two landscapes are the outcome of particular geographical and politico-economic trajectories, which, in the course of history, seem to have brought about a figure-ground reversal within the perceptual hierarchy of place and space within the two contexts in question. Following an introduction to the Duxa people and their landscape, I open by using actor-network theory to show how the Duxa conceive of their landscape as a heterogeneous network of prominent places. I then turn, more specifically, to the phenomenology of nomadic movement. It is suggested that, immersed in the boundlessness of their nomadic landscape, the Duxa perform a range of ritual actions that mould their spatial sensibilities in significant ways. Indeed, inasmuch as these practices clearly serve to anchor people's perceptions within an otherwise infinite vortex of relations, these ritual movements seem to be aimed towards an intimation of spatial finitude. The Duxa, it would appear, have truly learned the art of making a home away from homes.

The Duxa People

The Duxa (also known among Mongolians as the Tsaatang, or 'the reindeer people') are a group of approximately 500 ethnic Tuvinians inhabiting the Tsagaan Nuur district situated in the far north-western corner of Mongolia's Khovsgöl province. The Duxa's first language is Tuvinian, but they all speak fluent Mongolian.² Half of the Duxa live in or around the district centre of Tsagaan Nuur alongside Mongolian Darxad and Xalx semi-pastoralists, whereas the other half is dispersed over two large territories of coniferous forests and high alpine lands (*taiga*) where, since the collapse of Mongolian state-socialism in 1990, they have practiced a combined economy of reindeer-breeding, hunting, and trading. The adult members of this *taiga* community – the primary focus of this chapter – are fully nomadic. These nomadic Duxa move camp some ten to fifteen times each year, using their reindeer as pack and riding animals. They are divided into two semi-corporate groups – an 'Eastern' camp and a 'Western' camp – each tracing themselves back to a specific area of the (now) Tuvinian Autonomous Region of Russia, from where they migrated 200 years and 50 years ago respectively. The inhabitants of each camp live in tepee-shaped dwellings (*orts*) during the entire year, although, as elsewhere in rural Mongolia, the composition and size of each household (*ail*)

2. In this chapter all indigenous terms are presented in Mongolian as my data on the Duxa are the result of conversations and interviews carried out in this language.

varies according to the season. Unusually for Mongolia, the traditional clan system is still intact among the Duxa, the descendants of the original immigrant groups being divided into five exogamous clans. Descent is patrilineal, and each semi-corporate group is headed by an elderly male (informal) leader, who, among other things, has the final say in determining when and where the encampment will move. (For more on the Duxa, see Badamxatan 1987 and Wheeler 1999, 2000, and forthcoming. Cf. also Vainsthein 1980).

The Duxa inhabit the northernmost part of the Republic of Mongolia. This area – known as the Darxad Depression after its main indigenous group – is characterized by its many forests, rivers, and lakes, by its abundant wildlife, and by its extreme remoteness. High mountains – up to 3,500 meters – tower around a large, flat depression, and in between this upper alpine land and the lower steppe zone (which is inhabited by Darxad pastoralists), vast forests make possible the Duxa's reindeer-based nomadic livelihood. Among the (predominantly Buddhist) Xalx Mongolians, this area is renowned for its wild and beautiful nature, but also for its fierce and impoverished population of indigenous Duxa and Darxad nomads. Tellingly, one young city-dweller of the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar called the area the 'Dark Valley', a name referring not only to its rugged mountains and deep forests, but also to its feared shaman population of the 'black faith' (*xar mörgöl*) (see also Pedersen 2007b).

Indeed, the Duxa have a flourishing shamanist religion, and practicing shamans (*böö*) live in both *taiga* encampments and in the Tsagaan Nuur village, although, especially among those Duxa living in close proximity to Darxad and Xalx Mongolians, Lamaist Buddhism is having a significant religious impact as well. Being shamanist, or we could say animist (Pedersen 2001, 2007a), the nomadic Duxa regard their landscape as animated by both human and non-human agents. In particular, a multitude of spirits are understood to dwell within different phenomena of the *taiga*, such as prominent mountains, trees, rivers or wild animals. This sacred geography plays a significant role in Duxa everyday life. A successful hunt, for example, cannot be carried out without proper knowledge of the landscape, and, as we shall see below, such knowledge includes being aware of how to deal with its different spiritual entities.

Theorizing the Duxa Landscape

The Duxa landscape, then, is not simply comprised by the physical contours of the environment surrounding the nomadic camp. For one thing, a given camp does not define an enclosure of cultural space on the other side of which its inhabitants encounter a natural wilderness. 'Wild' spaces can be found inside each Duxa camp, just as 'tame' places can be found outside it. For another thing, the Duxa landscape ontology can be interpreted as a combination of a spiritual

background reality and a physical foreground reality (cf. Hirsch 1995). It is important, however, to keep in mind that this distinction is largely analytical. For the Duxa, it seems, the invisible background and the visible foreground of their landscape are collapsed into a simultaneously spiritual and physical presence of spirit 'owners' (*ezed*).³ Each of these spirits is believed to control something within the environment, be that the fireplace inside a tepee, the wild animals roaming around in the *taiga*, or the barren peaks of the highest mountains.

Let us consider a concrete example. Among the Duxa, most prominent mountains are believed to have 'owners', that is, intentional non-human agents with whom humans have to engage in a friendly and submissive manner so as to avoid trouble. One such mountain is called Agaya ('White Cliff') and many stories are told about this place. A special kind of spirit, the so-called *avlin*, 'own' this mountain. Normally, *avlin* are invisible but a few experienced hunters claim to have encountered them whilst travelling alone in the *taiga*. When the *avlin* show themselves to man, they always do so in the half shape of something. One hunter reports that he once saw the *avlin* in the form of 'half-people' (humans with only half of the face, their body being vertically sliced); another reports having encountered them in the shape of deer with only half the antlers.

As a rule, *avlin* are benevolent: they harm neither man nor beast. Once, a story goes, a group of children got lost in the vicinity of Agaya Mountain and had to spend the night alone in the *taiga*. But, mysteriously, the following morning they were found near to the camp, without a scratch. Though not able to provide any details of what had happened, the children did remember being fed with candy and kept warm by 'someone' during the night. However, the event later turned out to have harmful effects, for it was followed by a number of unusual deaths among the households involved in the incident. Another popular story involves a domestic reindeer disappearing near Agaya Mountain, only to return several days later. By then it had grown oddly twisted and beautifully coloured antlers, and, when eventually milked, was found to have wild flowers in its milk (for an account and analysis of a similar tale among the neighbouring Darxad people, see Pedersen 2007a).

As the following story shows, the wild animals belonging to Agaya Mountain 'owner' are also being watched over by the *avlin*. Once, a hunter had been tracking a wild reindeer for several days. He finally managed to shoot it,

3. Mongolian concepts of property are too complex to discuss in any detail here, but it should be emphasized that the terminology and practices pertaining to the proprietorial authority over land are essentially similar in the case of humans and non-human *ezed*. Indeed, the term *ezen* (pl. *ezed*) is used for any entity recognized to be the 'master' or 'owner' of a given constellation of subjects (e.g., *geriin ezen*, 'master of the yurt', a status which designates also 'ownership' of the household's domestic animals; or *uulyн ezen*, 'master of the mountain', a status involving proprietorialship over all life forms associated with the mountain, including the wild animals living in its vicinity). See also Humphrey (1996) and Sneath (2000).

only then to realize that he was uncomfortably near Agaya Mountain. Angered, the mountain spirit said to him: 'Why did you kill my animal?' The hunter was very scared, but, as it was getting dark, he had to spend the night on the spot. Upon awaking at dawn, he caught a glimpse of several half-people climbing the mountain. Turning around, he saw the wild reindeer rising from the spot where he had killed it the previous evening. The *avlin* had revitalized it. The hunter now looked at the mountain again, and at the very moment the half-people reached the top, a terrible blizzard broke out. Following this event, no one has hunted near Agaya Mountain. Instead, hunters occasionally go there to present offerings to its spirit owner.

This is not the place to make a comprehensive exegesis of the cultural context behind the above stories. Instead, I want to pursue a more specific point, namely that these stories seem to illustrate a general conception of the landscape as a fragmented totality of prominent places each surrounded by local fields of power. Indeed, the 'field' concept is particularly apt for describing the unfamiliar ontology described above, for this term conveys a recurring theme in Duxa animist thought, namely the idea of a focal point out of which beams of spiritual ownership somehow 'radiate' so as to produce a gradient halo-effect of non-human agency.

More stories could be retold to further substantiate that, while the Duxa landscape is imbued with many different kinds powerful places, they all seem to share the field morphology outlined above. As mentioned earlier, these places are not necessarily mountains, but also include freak trees (the so-called *böö mod*, or 'shaman trees') and other outstanding locations in the *taiga* or on the steppe. Often, the prominence of such places is explained as the result of shamans' actions in the past, as in the case of the burial places of deceased shamans (*ongod asar*), who, apparently, decided on these locations before passing away (see also Vainsthein 1996; Dioszegi 1963). Other places are considered prominent due to their connection to evil or unusual events which once occurred within particular households which used to live there. And, as we have seen, also the deeds (and misdeeds) of hunters continuously serve to instantiate particular qualities in the Duxa landscape. Finally, a significant number of places seem to be imbued with power simply because they are considered intrinsically beautiful, frightening or odd, such as in the case of the highest mountain, the fastest river, or the lone tree on the steppe (cf. Humphrey 1996).

The Duxa landscape, then, is heterogeneous. This should be understood both in the 'physical' sense, as a landscape consisting of different prominent places, and in the 'metaphysical' sense, as a landscape whose invisible qualities originate from the actions of different social agencies, be they human or non-human ones. In the Duxa landscape, then, it is not only that the multiplicity of prominent places adds up to a heterogeneous topography, it is also that their spiritual halos together constitute an ontology of heterogeneous powers.

If newer anthropological writings on landscape constitute the overarching theoretical framework behind this chapter, Bruno Latour's 'actor-network theory' (ANT) provides much of its theoretical vocabulary. Three ANT lessons are worthwhile to emphasize in light of the present analysis.

First, according to the ANT perspective, an actor is defined semiotically, that is, an actor is anyone or anything – be that a human or a non-human – 'granted to be the source of an action'. (Latour 1996: 374; see also Latour 1993: 62–65). Second, a network is neither just a social structure, nor is it simply a technological thing. A network is rather a sort of fragmented totality cross-cutting the domains of society (humans) and environment (non-humans), for it is comprised of all the connections that can be traced between a given constellation of human and non-human actors (cf. Latour 1996). Third, an actor-network is never homogeneous, it is always heterogeneous. A given actor-network is not confined to a finite, homogeneous territory demarcated by clear-cut boundaries; rather, it carries the potential of infinite expansion due to the unproblematic incorporation of all the kinds of actors, however different, the network may mobilize (cf. Latour 1993).

Now, if we paraphrase one of Latour's definitions of the actor-network by substituting the word 'networks' with 'Duxa landscapes', the following proposition appears: '[Duxa landscapes] are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society' (Latour 1993: 6). This theoretical rendition of the Duxa landscape is highly satisfactory. As we have seen, the Duxa clearly conceive their landscape as an arena of intentional actors, that is, as a quasi-social collective. The Agaya Mountain example showed that, while the Duxa evidently do not conflate humans with non-humans, they seem to incorporate a number of non-humans – such as the mountain 'owners' – into their concept of sociality. Also, the Duxa landscape is subject to an ever accumulating number of stories; that is, the landscape also takes the form of a narrative. Indeed, the ongoing narration of hunting stories is not only inseparable from what makes a Duxa hunter a good hunter, it is also constitutive for the perception of the environment as such, since, for a significant number of Duxa (notably the women), listening to hunting stories is all they will ever experience about certain places in the landscape, such as Agaya Mountain. Finally, the Duxa landscape is obviously also very real. The magnitude of its mountains, the strong currents of its many rivers, the bitter cold of the winter gales from the North – these all give rise to powerful bodily and aesthetic experiences (e.g., that the highest mountains are bound to have spirit masters) that are hard to overestimate.

Place and Space in the Duxa Landscape

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Duxa perception of the environment is their focus on places at the expense of spaces. As already hinted at, the fields radiating from non-human entities in the landscape have well-defined centres, but

their external boundaries seem correspondingly ill-defined. Certainly, the case of the sacred mountains fits this characterization. As we saw in the above Agaya Mountain examples, the peak of this mountain unquestionably is the genius loci of the *avlin* spirits. Little attention, however, is paid to spatial boundaries in these and other stories. It is true that the hunter of wild reindeer ‘suddenly realized’ that he was near this mountain, but it is still impossible to establish any demarcation of the ‘owner’s’ domain of influence from this story. The same goes for other Duxa narratives about this mountain. What really seems to matter is that something unusual took place in the *taiga*, and that this event was linked to the agency of the Agaya spirit, not so much where it happened.

I once asked a young Darxad herdsman to draw a map of the immediate landscape surrounding us. We were standing on top of a hilltop near the border zone between the *taiga* and the steppe, and the herdsman was very careful in his depiction of the various mountain peaks on the horizon. Many of these had ‘owners’ and each of these mountains/spirits had a particular nickname. Asked about the existence of boundaries (*xil*) in the landscape, my friend insisted that there were no boundaries at all. Perplexed by this answer, I asked him whether a highly sacred mountain pass in the far distance did not represent a boundary of sorts. After all, I added, people on the two sides of the mountain pass call themselves by different names, just as the two areas belong to different sub-districts (*bag*). But the herdsman persisted: his homeland was boundless (*xilgüü*), and the political distinctions were merely names of the land (*gazaryn ner*), not boundaries in the land.⁴ Finally, I pointed towards a river at our feet, cross-cutting the entire view towards the west, and asked him whether this river did not define a boundary. But again he stressed the lack of spatial boundaries; in fact, judging from his laughter, my question about rivers as boundaries did not seem to make much sense to him.⁵

4. Not surprisingly, Mongolia’s national borders present a quite different story. Indeed, given that the Duxa live at Mongolia’s remote northern border, and may occasionally cross (illegally) into Russia to hunt, it seems that this national border has become embedded within their place-oriented nomadic landscape. Based on recent fieldwork among the Duxa, Wheeler thus argues that, for the Duxa nomads, ‘the state as a [homeland], which is left behind and never occupied, becomes visible precisely at the point of movement from it’ (Wheeler, forthcoming).
5. Of course, rivers do constitute natural barriers in the Darxad Depression, something that is clearly recognized by people at the level of everyday practice. Still, it is rather telling that the Mongolian word for river, *gol*, also denotes the idea of a centre. *Gol* is thus used for a range of ‘intrinsically centred’ phenomena, such as an ‘aorta’ (*gol sudas*), the ‘heartwood of a tree’ (*modyn gol*), the ‘axle of a wagon’ (*tergenii gol*); as well as, more metaphorically, a ‘moral imperative’ (*gol yos*) and what is ‘most important’ (*xamgiin gol*) (Hangin et al. 1986). This would seem to imply that, at least at the ideological level, rivers are conceived of as much as life-giving *cores* of the land as spatial boundaries constituting its outer fringes. Certain practices in Inner Mongolia seem to convey an analogous idea. There, local pastoralists treat the Great Wall not so much as an impassable obstacle for nomadic movement but, rather, as a particularly attractive route to follow in their annual migrations (Caroline Humphrey, personal communication).

In sum, it is my impression that, whereas few residents of the Darxad Depression will doubt that the *genius loci* of mountain ‘owners’ is the very heart of the mountains (the peaks), people will either disagree or not even know where the possible boundary between two mountain owners’ realms goes. And, as the above example illustrates, this lack of spatial boundaries not only refers to the metaphysical qualities of the landscape, it refers to physical, ethnic, and political aspects as well (to the extent that this atomization into aspects of the landscape makes sense in the present case at all). Put differently, many domains of the Duxa landscape do not seem to be ‘owned’ by anyone in particular, be that humans or non-humans. At the same time, however, many specific locations in the landscape have ‘owners’, be they particular trees, lakes or – as we have seen – mountains.

So, whereas a number of places are imbued with particular qualities (spirit-powers), most of the spaces in between these places are ontologically neutral, that is, they are devoid of any invisible spiritual substance. This, of course, does not imply that such spaces are not perceived at all, it only means that they do not qualify as (permanent) *loci* of powerful non-human entities. This difference is also expressed in the different toponymical regimes employed for places and spaces respectively. As already mentioned, sacred places such as mountains are usually known by their nicknames, since enunciation and indeed knowledge of their real names is conceived of as dangerous, which is why this domain is left to the shamans to deal with. Names of spaces, on the other hand, such as administrative districts, are unproblematic to utter and are regarded as common knowledge.⁶

Nomadic and Sedentary Landscapes

Why, then, do the Duxa seem to highlight places at the expense of spaces? One good answer is that a topology of spaces and boundaries is not really workable when people constantly move from one place to another. The effect of a spatial boundary, one may argue, is to separate one finite domain from another, and one wider implication of such a demarcation seems to be the denial of frequent movement between such enclosed spaces. So what, one may ask, is the use of spatial boundaries when the nomadic lifestyle evidently implies their continuous crossing?

6. Arguably, many of Mongolia’s *official* place names originate from now forgotten cases of such toponymical substitution. It certainly is striking that every fifty to a hundred kilometres place names such as ‘White Lake’ (Tsagaan Nuur) or ‘Red Hill’ (Ulaan Tolgoi) reappear across Mongolia’s territory (Humphrey 1995). Given that the ruthless Communist persecution of Mongolia’s shamans is recognized to have left a large gap in people’s esoteric knowledge, it is entirely conceivable that the topogenic systems once used to link different patrilineals to their respective shamanic burial grounds have now been forgotten, with the secondary effect that the former *nicknames* of these places have today acquired the role of official names.

Think about the herdsman who was asked to make a depiction of his landscape with respect to the different ‘spirit-owners’ inhabiting it. Evidently, the result was quite unlike a conventional political map using different colours to depict distinct, bounded territories. Instead, his representation was one depicting a multitude of dots in between which there were large gaps of unqualified space. Now think of the stereotypical Balinese landscape consisting of neat terraces of rice paddies, or, even better, the characteristic Northern European countryside with its well-demarcated agricultural fields, each consisting of a single and pure crop. Imagine an aerial photograph of such a landscape. Clearly, the result will be a pattern of different, finite spaces that, just like the political map, are internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous. Then imagine moving around within this configuration. This would seem to give rise to a feeling of spatial discontinuity; of having to jump from one pure domain to another.

Sedentary landscapes, I suggest, are precisely characterized by such finite, homogeneous spaces with clear-cut boundaries between them. For the Duxa and possibly also for other nomadic people as well, however, a dominant topology of places and boundlessness seems much more meaningful given their life on the move. Unlike the ‘economy of spaces’ characteristic of sedentary landscapes, the ‘economy of places’ characteristic of nomadic landscapes engenders neither boundaries nor finite spaces. Certainly, the Duxa economy of places has been shown to lead to something quite different, namely a multitude of spatial centres – or focal points – from each of which a (potentially) infinite spatial realm takes its beginning.

A given Duxa camp can thus be said to constitute a distinct place from which vectors point towards the different sacred mountains located at varying distances from it. From one camp, the main vectors will point towards, say, mountains A and B, and, from another, they will point towards, say, mountains C and D. However, neither encampment is for this reason enclosed within a finite space, nor can one talk of any clear-cut spatial boundary marking the transition from the one campsite to the other. Rather, the two camps differ with respect to the two unique configurations of powerful places that arise from their respective locations. What distinguishes a given point in this nomadic landscape, then, is the impure mixture of distinct places, not a purist demarcation into distinct spaces.

This brings us back to Latour. A given actor-network, we may recall, consists of different nodes – actors – from which threads towards disparate directions take their beginning. In principle, such a network knows no ending, it has no boundaries. Each node is the starting point of its own unique network, but any one such network is not qualitatively different from the network defined by another position, it is always a potential part of it. Movement within a network thus implies continuity; or what Latour calls

'translation', from one network to another, neither of which was ever pure. As Latour puts it, 'a network has no outside' (1996: 373).

In that sense, the distinct place defined by a Duxa encampment is the starting point of a temporary actor-network, i.e., a unique blend of human and non-human agents, and this actor-network will not differ in kind from the one instantiated by a neighbouring (past or future) encampment; it will only differ in degree. For a given Duxa camp is just one place among a number of places (e.g., camps) from where the human actors, who temporally reside there, are compelled to engage with the non-human actors, who (may) permanently reside there. A Duxa camp can therefore be said to constitute a distinct configuration of human agents temporarily embedded within a unique animist configuration of non-human agents; they must therefore seek to act within this actor-network to facilitate their desired effects, however mundane or esoteric these might be.

Some Necessary Qualifications

It must be emphasized that the proposed difference between nomadic and sedentary landscapes does not assume the problematic existence of two monolithic cultures radically different in kind (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997). What in my view can be said to differ in kind is rather the two modes of spatial perception – the economy of place and the economy of space – which seem to be dominant in the two landscape-ontologies respectively. Neither spatial economy, I would argue, is restricted to particular socio-cultural settings. Instead, the two modes should be conceived of as universal spatial dispositions, which may or may not be foregrounded in a given form of social life. This, however, should not be understood in the hardcore mentalist sense that the materiality of the lived environment does not play a significant role in the cognitive construction of the two landscape-ontologies in question. Following Hutchins (1995: xiv), I rather take the softer position according to which cognition always occurs in the wild, in the form of an 'ecology of thinking in which human cognition interacts with an environment rich in organizational resources'. What have here been dubbed nomadic and sedentary landscapes, therefore, might alternatively be described as two complex socio-material nexi (viz. horizons of situated cognition) through which Mongolia's nomads navigate in a certain – but only to a very limited degree predisposed – way (see also Pedersen 2007 c).

So exactly what lies behind the apparent figure-ground reversal in the perceptual hierarchy between place and space outlined in this chapter? This brings me to another reservation that might be raised against my argument so far, namely that it appears to downplay the impact of politico-economic upheavals in the constitution of the two landscapes in question. Clearly, the dominance of the space-economy of northern Europe's sedentary landscapes is inseparable from

particular Euro-Western histories of governmentality, rationalization, and secularization (see Berglund, this volume), just as the dominant place-economy of the Duxa nomadic landscape is intimately linked to the complex politico-economic history of overlapping polities and empires within the Inner Asian region generally, and in north-western Mongolia specifically.

Elsewhere (Pedersen 2002 and 2007b), I have described the historical trajectories by which the current inhabitants of the Darxad Depression have come to be positioned at the extreme margin of the modern Mongolian nation-state. Without going into detail, it should be emphasized that we are not talking about one singular colonial narrative of Euro-Western hegemony here. The processes which have led to the current livelihood of the Duxa nomads date back at least 300 years, to the time when the (then) powerful Mongolian Buddhist church gained *de facto* sovereignty over most of the Darxad Depression within the overarching colonial framework of the Manchu empire. Confined to the outer periphery of this ecclesiastical estate, and being classified as 'external subjects' (*xariyat*) of the so-called Xövsgöl Urianxai Borderland (Wheeler, forthcoming), the predominantly Tuvinian inhabitants of the *taiga* gained a reputation as a bunch of wild shamanists, who, unlike their Darxad neighbours, had yet to taste the fruits of (Gelugpa) Buddhist civilization. Ironically, this process of stigmatization only gained momentum during Mongolia's seven decades of state-socialist rule, when the Duxa became the unwilling subjects of the often paradoxical discourses and interventions of Marxist cultural politics (cf. Grant 1995). Although the majority of the Duxa population was enrolled in Mongolia's collectivization programme from the mid-1950s, their proper integration into the planned economy was always subject to a good deal of official doubt. Indeed, a small group of mainly elderly Duxa were apparently deemed to be beyond the reach of historical-materialist progress, and were effectively left to 'nomadize' in the *taiga* in accordance with their 'backwards' pre-revolutionary way of life. It was against this historical background that, in the early 1990s, some descendants of the aforementioned group decided to settle in the *taiga* following the sudden collapse of the state-run hunting and fishing collective, which had hitherto constituted the social and economic basis of their lives (see also Wheeler 2000).

Like many other nomadic peoples, then, the story of the Duxa is one of extreme political, economic, and cultural marginalization. What makes the Duxa case quite unique, however, is not only the fact that most of them have only become (full-time) nomads quite recently, but also the fact that, in contemporary Mongolia, more than one third of the population is registered as nomads – a fact which, it should perhaps be noted, is highly appreciated by most Mongolians. So, where my previous analyses at first glance might appear to suffer from a traditionalist anthropological bias towards the study of small-scale societies mysteriously sheltered from wider political and economical

processes, the truth is that the Duxa case seems to represent a particularly revealing illustration of the more general process in which, to turn Bloch's argument (1986) on its head, ideology is turned into cognition. For it is clear that, inasmuch as the unfamiliar landscape described above could be interpreted as a subaltern perspective construed in accordance with the counter-hegemonic agendas of a certain marginalized group (see, e.g., Day et al. 1999), this nomadic ideology nonetheless has significant ontological implications for those people whose life is on the move. After all, if the horizon within which one's navigation occurs is dominated by the sort of heterogeneous socio-geographical networks elucidated above, then it seems to matter precious little whether or not this nomadic landscape is, in fact, the indirect outcome of certain critical events that took place in late twentieth-century Moscow.

To conclude this section let me briefly consider a very different nomadic landscape, namely that of central London. For this cityscape can be conceived of as an environment that entails a reactivation of the place-economy – and consequently a deactivation of the space-economy – at the very heart of Euro-Western society. When travelling around London, and particularly with the London Underground, one's perception of the environment is clearly very place-oriented. Imagine taking the Tube from, say, Piccadilly Circus to Holborn. Even for long-time residents, the perception of these two domains of the central London landscape must be significantly moulded by the recurring experience of suddenly emerging above ground from the two underground stations respectively. Following an initial lack of orientation, one will focus on a significant place near or at the station – such as a tall building – and literally move on from there.

Central London, then, should perhaps not so much be described as a typical sedentary landscape characterized by bounded spaces and fixed boundaries (its many parks being a notable exception), but rather as a sort of urban nomadic landscape defined by prominent places, such as Underground stations, from which particular networks of both human and non-human actors take their beginning.

A Home away from Homes

I now turn my attention to the Duxa perception of the landscape while they are on the move. In order to engage with this question, I will concentrate solely on Duxa migration. (Obviously, the Duxa interact with their environment in many other ways, such as when hunting, herding reindeer, or collecting firewood or pine nuts in the *taiga*.)

Migration among the Duxa is highly ritualized. When the Duxa move camp, they begin by packing up their belongings in a very specific order, and when they arrive at the new campsite, they end the journey by unpacking these things in exactly the reverse order. On either occasion each household also

makes a sacrifice to the mountain 'owners' believed to preside over the given campsite. It is also significant that the Duxa do not tear down their tepees completely. Rather, just before departure, the men carefully take down the wooden poles of the tepee one by one and put these on the ground, only to leave a skeleton of naked poles. After that, the women carefully clean the inside ground of each dismantled tepee. When one travels through the Duxa landscape one occasionally notices these abandoned camp sites which, were it not for their characteristic wooden structures, would be indistinguishable from the surrounding environment (see also Wheeler, forthcoming).

Why are the Duxa so keen on carrying out these highly formalized practices; why do they not just move? To move camp is, although it happens frequently, a highly significant event. The day of migration is a special day, and potentially a dangerous day. Things may go wrong; the 'owners', for example, of either campsite might become offended by people's wrongdoings (such as forgetting to present them with a sacrifice). On a more implicit level, the ritual practices occurring at the new as well as in the old camp also seem to represent a celebration of place, or rather a facilitation of the transfer of spatial sensibility from one place to another. For when the Duxa carry out the same formalized practices, but in reversed order, at the new and old camp respectively, they seem to effect the lifting of the 'home-ish' qualities of their previous campsite to the new one. The Duxa's careful cleaning of the campsite to be abandoned also supports this point. Given the existence of the tepee skeletons at former campsites, it would however be wrong to say that the Duxa, when moving, reduce their former places of dwelling into unqualified, neutral space. Rather, the abandoned campsites continue their existence as distinct places; it is only that their home-ish qualities, by virtue of the aforementioned ritual practices, seem to be reduced to potentials now latent in these places. Indeed, like many nomads, the Duxa usually return to a former campsite the following year, thus rendering possible a reverse transformation of this place from a potential home into an actual one.

The Duxa, then, are not just packing up their various physical belongings to later unpack these at the new camp site. They also seem momentarily to wrap their metaphysical 'sense of place', to borrow a term from Feld and Basso (1996), only to start unwrapping this sensibility at the moment they reach their new home.

Turning now to the phenomenology of nomadic movement itself, the Duxa, whilst on the move, will ride in a certain order, just as they will follow particular tracks in the land and make great efforts not to stop, except at those places where, as I was told, 'people usually make a halt'. Amongst these, the so-called *ovoo* are particularly interesting. The typical Mongolian *ovoo* consists of a cairn of stones, although in forested regions some are made of tree branches (the form and function of these *ovoo* are identical to the stone type). Generally,

ovoo are found at those places – in particular, mountain peaks and passes – known to be *genii loci* of land ‘masters’. For the same reason, *ovoo* traditionally were bound up with the social reproduction of patrilineal clans, whose male members performed annual sacrificial rites (*ovooni taxilga*) at the *ovoo* site corresponding to the land appropriated by them (e.g., Heissig 1985). During communism, the *ovoo* institution lost most of its politico-religious salience. Today, the *ovoo* institution is being re-invigorated across Mongolia. On the one hand, this is happening in the form of elaborate sacrificial rituals involving politico-religious communities corresponding to local districts or sub-districts. On the other hand, the *ovoo* are also subject to more everyday ritual practices. When people, including the Duxa, travel in rural Mongolia many will stop at any given *ovoo* encountered on their way. Ideally, one must then pick up three stones and circumambulate the *ovoo* three times in a clockwise direction, each time throwing a stone at the *ovoo* and perhaps also making a silent prayer to the spirit it incarnates.

My concern here is not to analyse the systems of belief (whether shamanist or Buddhist) connected with *ovoo*. My more limited aim is to discuss what effects the aforementioned ritual actions have on the Duxa perception of their environment. Essentially, I want to argue that the highly formalized bodily practices performed at the Mongolian *ovoo* sites bring about a continuous re-evocation of the nomadic landscape. The fact that people circumambulate the *ovoo*, I believe, only further underscores my previous assertion that, in the nomadic landscape, places are highlighted at the expense of spaces. For, when the Duxa stop at an *ovoo*, they seem to instantiate a fixed point of reference resembling that of a given campsite. The *ovoo* circumambulation, in short, serves to (re)establish yet another node in the network of prominent places earlier described.

Keeping in mind the Duxa’s nomadic livelihood, any given *ovoo* might therefore be described as ‘a home away from homes’. Of course, like all homes that are not real homes, the *ovoo* site is not a site of permanent dwelling, but a temporary place of rest. But my point is that the Duxa, in order to activate this spatial refuge, must act in certain ways so as to intimate a perception of spatial finitude. As I shall show in the final section of this chapter, the practice of *ovoo* circumambulation, itself occurring within the wider framework of ritualized nomadic movement, serves momentarily to untangle the Duxa from the infinite nomadic landscape in which they are otherwise entangled whilst on the move.

Intimations of Finitude

We have seen that the animist geography of the Duxa landscape, taken together with the downplaying of bounded spaces seemingly inherent to nomadic livelihood, allow us to characterize the Duxa landscape as an actor-network.

Strictly speaking, however, the infinity of an actor-network is measured in relational, not spatial, terms. For Latour (1996), networks do not exist in a conventional space, where distances are expressed for example by 'near' and 'far'. Rather, an actor-network has a distinct topology in which a given extent is measured, vector-like, as either 'long' or 'short'. Consequently, a given actor-network is not suspended in a container of empty space, it rather contains itself by instantiating boundaries that paradoxically do not demarcate any limits (which is also why networks exist independently of concepts of inside and the outside). Strictly speaking, then, an actor-network cannot be described with reference to the category of space at all, for what really counts is the number of actors, or places, standing in a certain relationship to each other.

Yet the infinity of the Duxa landscape clearly is measured in terms of spatial limitlessness. In fact, and very much like the Euro-Western case (see Kirby, Chapter One, this volume), the Duxa (and more generally the Mongolian) perception of the environment is highly ocularcentric. To shamanists and Buddhists alike, the greatest power imaginable is the Sky (*Tenger*), which, being represented as simultaneously omnipresent and transcendental, is praised in countless prayers, songs, and tales. Immersed in an environment of often limitless views, and living under an 'eternal blue sky' (as they like to put it themselves), Mongolia's nomads have – at least in their own understanding – come to despise spatial confinement. However, this Mongolian 'space' is not quite the same as (modernist) Euro-Western space. At a less ideological level, the Mongolian steppe environment is thus perceived in a manner that brings to mind the 'non-insular' perspective from Island Melanesia, as described by Mondragón (this volume). As pointed out by several anthropologists, Mongolia's pastoralists conceive of the vast steppe expanses not as unified blocks of unqualified space severely restricting one's actions (as deserts or oceans are often represented in Western traditions), but rather as a limitless haecceity of potential action comprised by sociologically as well as spiritually distributed tracks and routes (i.e., vectors) cross-cutting domains that a Euro-Westerner would regard as ontologically distinct (Humphrey 1995; Pedersen 2001, 2007c; cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1999: 380 ff.).

My point, however, is that exactly this positivization of the limitless expanse renders necessary a converse fetishization of particular places. Following Strathern (1996), I would thus insist that man cannot tolerate being continuously part of an infinite actor-network: at some point he will need to 'cut it', somehow or another. So, if the Mongolian nomadic landscape can be described as an actor-network, then the Duxa must have developed particular ways of curtailing this infinite horizon of action.

This is exactly what the *oooo* rituals, amongst other things, accomplish. Indeed the *oooo* circumambulations seem to have a double impact with respect to Duxa manipulations of spatial perception. On the one hand, as we have

seen, people's clockwise movements around the *ovoo* instantiate an anchored point from which the entirety of the environment can be apprehended – a spatial vantage from which people can loop into the infinity of the nomadic landscape, as it were. But, on the other hand, people's circumambulation of the *ovoo* also seems to make possible a simultaneous looping out of this landscape by enacting a sort of 'magic circle', within the nebulous perimeter of which a finite space is intimated. Try, thus, to imagine moving 360 degrees around an object, clockwise, as the Duxa do in the everyday *ovoo* ritual. If you look straight ahead, you are part of the motion. If you turn your head to the left, you fall out of the motion, towards an infinite expanse. If you look right, however, as people do when carefully throwing the stones at the *ovoo*, you fall into the axis of your motion towards an impermanently self-contained micro-cosmos. This is what I mean by 'looping out' of the nomadic landscape.

By way of conclusion, allow me to note the potentially significant fact that Duxa and Mongolian nomads alike prefer to live in round dwellings, or, we could say, permanently self-contained micro-cosmoses. The forest Duxa live, as already mentioned, in tepees (*orts*), whereas most pastoralist Mongols live in felt yurts (*ger*). The different architecture and symbolism of the two dwellings aside, their general design is similar in form as well as function, as are the highly formalized rules governing the manner in which both groups are supposed to navigate within these miniature landscapes. In fact, one might speculate whether a detailed analysis of the distinct modes of spatial perception within these dwellings would reveal a tension between the bounded and the limitless, between the finite and the infinite, very similar to the one that I have sought to expose in this chapter.

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