

# FAITH, RECIPROCITY, AND BALANCE

## Inner Mongolian Ovoo offering ritual and its contribution to climate change adaptation

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### Introduction

There is growing worldwide concern about climate change and how it might impact people, for which adaptation strategies have received considerable attention, from individual to national level (Aguiar et al., 2018; Biesbroek et al., 2010). However, in these efforts, Indigenous Peoples have rarely been considered in public debates until recently (Nyong et al., 2007; Salick & Ross, 2009). Under the current climate crisis, Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately susceptible to environmental stress because of their historical dependence on local biodiversity and cultural landscapes as a source of sustenance and well-being (Adger et al., 2012). However, Indigenous Peoples and local communities are not mere helpless victims of climate change impacts, but have valuable knowledge systems, which are at the roots of their capacity to cope with environmental changes and uncertainties (Hosen et al., 2020; Smith & Sharp, 2012).

The last decade has seen a surge of interest in community-based and participatory climate change adaptation approaches that integrate Indigenous knowledge (Galappaththi, 2024; McNamara & Buggy, 2016). In that sense, the importance of bringing together different forms of knowledge, including Indigenous knowledge, to enhance existing practices is recognized by many climate change researchers (e.g., García-del-Amo et al., 2020). For example, the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC (2021) emphasizes the importance of recognizing Indigenous knowledge, as well as integrating insights from different knowledge systems with scientific research to fully understand and address the implications of climate change. Despite this surge, when considering how to bring different knowledge systems together, most of the previous focus has been on management aspects embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems (Reyes-García et al., 2021), with aspects related to Indigenous worldviews and spirituality, as well as their significance for climate change adaptation, having received little attention (Luetz & Nunn, 2020).

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is known by a wide variety of terms, including, local knowledge, traditional knowledge, and traditional ecological knowledge. It has many definitions and there is no consensus on an operational definition applicable across disciplines. Rajasekaran (1993, p.171), for example, fixes the scope of IK to ‘the systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments and intimate

understanding of the environment in a given culture'. In contrast, Fikret Berkes (2017) argues that IK includes not only direct observation and interaction of local people with the environment, but also a broad spectrum of cultural and spiritual knowledge and values that underpin human–environment relationships. This definition of IK is more representative of Indigenous Peoples' cosmologies, which acknowledge that the environment consists of conscious, sentient entities and spirits.

Since Indigenous Peoples are often strongly spiritually engaged, their understanding of environmental changes and responses to them are framed within spiritual beliefs, rationalizations, and elements of their long-standing culture. Under certain circumstances, Indigenous worldviews and spirituality have been described as preserving conservative and fatalistic attitudes that constrain the development of effective climate actions (Wolf & Moser, 2011). However, Indigenous worldviews have also been described as playing positive roles. For example, Quechuan communities in the Potato Park of Cusco region, Peru, have successfully grown and conserved 2,300 potato varieties, focusing on varieties that can withstand climatic extremes. Moreover, they have also rejected the use of modern farming techniques and chemicals in favour of maintaining traditional practices that are better connected with local cycles and can help adapt to climate change impacts. These activities are all propelled by Quechuan communities' traditional values, such as *Ayni*, which refers to the reciprocal process of giving and receiving from elements of nature to maintain the harmony of the world, or *chanincha*, which refers to the solidarity between the human, the natural, and the spiritual worlds (Walshe & Argumedo, 2016).

Indeed, many spiritual rituals practiced by Indigenous Peoples are also directly related to nature, including some specifically related to weather (e.g., rainmaking rituals). Consequently, it is not much of a leap to expect that the belief system that embeds these rituals might influence individual or community responses to weather variability and/or climate change. To explore the issue, this chapter focuses on the case of Inner Mongolia, a northern autonomous region of China. Through different periods of environmental changes, Inner Mongolians have demonstrated their persistent capability to conserve ecosystem services and co-evolve with the natural world (Tang & Gavin, 2010; Xie & Li, 2008). The role of the Ovoo offering ritual in this adaptation process has not been explored. Thus, the main question we ask in this chapter is 'How do rituals might help communities to cope with the ongoing climate change impacts?' To answer this question, we focus on the Ovoo offering ritual and its potential contribution to transmitting traditional worldviews, bridging networks of reciprocity, and promoting sustainable behaviours.

## **Methods**

This chapter used a qualitative approach based on content analysis of primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted among herders from East Ujimqin Banner, while the secondary data were obtained from relevant published books and journal articles.

We acknowledge the mixed positionality of the researchers. The first author was born and nurtured in the grasslands of East Ujimqin Banner and she is currently studying in Europe. She self-identifies as an Indigenous Mongolian researcher, for which conducting research in her mother tongue, native land, and with her community has intellectual and personal importance for her. The second author is from China and has completed her Ph.D. and postdoctoral study focusing on Indigenous and local knowledge systems. The senior author is a non-Indigenous scholar who has worked with plural knowledge systems for over two decades.

### ***Description of the study area***

Inner Mongolia, located in northern China, has 87 million ha of natural grassland, and is home to over 4.5 million Mongolians (Han et al., 2009). Nomadic pastoralism, dependent on grassland availability, continues to be an important part of the local herder's identity.

Most of the Mongolian grasslands are situated in arid and semi-arid regions. In recent years, the rapidly changing climate, various human activities, and policy implementations, namely land tenure reform, have accelerated grassland degradation in Inner Mongolia (Li et al., 2017), disturbing the well-being of Mongolian herders and threatening their culture (Li & Huntsinger, 2011).

Despite their long history of interactions with the environment, Inner Mongolian herders are often depicted as responsible for land degradation due to overgrazing (e.g., Fang & Wu, 2022). They are also considered as an uneducated group of people who lack scientific knowledge of grassland management, are victims of climate change, and need help (Zhang et al., 2021). Indeed, over the last decades, the Chinese government has designed policies for the development of the region (Li & Huntsinger, 2011), which neglect and undervalue local forms of knowledge and management. For example, in the early 1980s, the Chinese government introduced the 'land tenure reform' to improve grassland management and avoid the 'tragedy of the commons' in Inner Mongolia (Fang & Wu, 2022). This policy, however, resulted in the overall deterioration of the Inner Mongolian pastoral system and grasslands. The distribution of land property rights to individual households, as proposed by the land tenure reform, made it hard for many herders to continue their mobility strategy, resulting in an inability to respond quickly to the unexpected environmental crisis (Conte, 2015). Moreover, the land tenure reform also caused the collapse of the cooperative relationships between herders. Before the land tenure reform, reciprocal relations between herders helped them cope with adverse weather events. However, the land tenure policy transformed the former reciprocal relations into competitive ones (Li & Huntsinger, 2011).

### ***Data collection***

#### *Secondary data*

This chapter collected secondary data from published books and journal articles. Four different sources of ethnographic research data were used: Bilegsaikhan (2017), Lindskog (2016, 2019), and Huang (2019). Each researcher from which we collected ethnographic data had conducted around two to three years of field research and documented many interview responses from herders related to the Mongolian Ovoo offering ritual. Additionally, the detailed book of 阿尔门德 (2004) about Mongolian religion and the Ovoo offering ritual was used to understand the origin and customary norms of this ritual.

#### *Primary data*

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews through *Wechat*, a Chinese social media application. We aimed to interview local people who (1) were representative community members; (2) were or had been herders; (3) were knowledgeable about the Ovoo offering ritual and Mongolian culture in general, and (4) were able and willing to share their knowledge. We started by interviewing a personal contact of the first author and then used the snowball sampling method to identify three other interviewees through the interviewee's recommendations.

In order to capture all the details, such as the interviewee's facial expressions, voices, and emotions, video calls were used. Interviews were conducted in the Mongolian language and explored herders' perspectives about the Ovoo offering ritual and its potential role in (1) transmitting traditional worldviews, (2) bridging networks of reciprocity, and (3) promoting sustainable behaviours.

### ***Data analysis***

We used content analysis (Bernard, 2011) to analyse secondary and primary data. After familiarizing ourselves with the data, citations from secondary sources and information from the interview notes were divided into meaningful units. Then, we developed codes (e.g., celebrate collectivity and respect for nature) that are descriptive labels for each meaningful unit and sorted the codes into different categories. Finally, categories were classified into three predetermined themes that guide our analysis: transmission of the traditional worldview, bridging networks of reciprocity, and promoting sustainable behaviours.

## **Results**

### ***The Ovoo offering ritual***

In Mongolian, the word *Ovoo* literally means 'pile.' But for Mongolians, the word contains parts of their history and culture. *Ovoo* is generally an impressive stone feature on the landscape, often in an unusual shape. It can be found throughout the Inner Mongolian region, but it is often located on mountaintops or close to water sources. Mongolians believe in a world populated by spirits and deities that are an organic part of nature. Every creature has a spirit and significance. They feel that everything in their world is connected through their spirits. In that sense, every *Ovoo* is believed to house a master spirit who often takes a strikingly similar physical form to the landscapes where they are found and are usually distinguished by their unique myths. For example, the spiritual master of the *Arsleng* (lion) *Ovoo* in East Ujimqin is a lion. In *Arsleng* *Ovoo* mythology, the lion master protects humans and the environment. In addition to animal deities, there are also human deities, predominantly female figures. The *Eej Nuur* (mother lake) *Ovoo* in East Ujimqin banner is a spiritual master in the form of a mother who provides milk to her people.

The *Ovoo* offering rituals aim to protect communities from misfortunes and environmental hazards through communicating and pleasing spiritual masters. Moreover, spiritual masters are not always friendly and can sometimes be wrathful. Anyone who has violated the customary norms concerning the master spirits could be punished by them. Therefore, *Ovoo* sites carry a set of rules and regulations regarding people's behaviour. For example, following unwritten norms of Mongolian herders, hurting animals, cutting down trees, polluting the sites, and drinking alcohol are all activities banned during offerings (Lindskog, 2019). In addition to these general rules, based on its geographic location and landscape characteristics, each *Ovoo* has specific rules regarding what kind of food and drink can be offered (阿尔门德, 2004). For example, when the *Ovoo* is situated near a water source, milk and animal meat cannot be offered to avoid potential pollution of the water.

Almost every offering is followed by an *Ovoon Naadam*, a festival where the 'three games of men' are played: wrestling, horse racing, and archery. *Ovoon Naadam* is held for three successive days after the conclusion of an offering. All local and nearby women, men, and children participate or watch the games. Every family would move their yurt near the festival site and invite each other to eat, drink, sing, and dance together. The elders usually play Mongolian chess, while the younger play *shagai*, a traditional dice game using sheep ankle bones.

### ***The role of Ovoo in transmitting traditional Mongolian worldviews***

Mongolian traditional worldview is predominantly spiritual and espouses a minimal separation between the physical and metaphysical world. Mongolians believe that different and legitimate ways of beings, such as humans, animals, stones, and rivers, are conceived as a collection of energies that influence and balance each other mutually. This understanding also can be seen in the Mongolian language. For example, the Mongolian term ‘*baigal*,’ translated as nature, is closely connected to ‘*baidal*,’ which refers to an ideal state of equality and balance between different elements of a unified whole (Humphrey & Sneath, 1999). This perceived notion of balance comprises a fundamental ontological principle for Mongolian people to understand and engage with the spiritual and the natural world. According to a herder’s statement, the livelihoods of herders and the welfare of pastures and animals depend on the balance among them. Mongolian nomadism is rooted in the belief of a harmonious balance between all beings (Lindskog, 2016).

The Ovoo offering ritual itself is supported by and embedded in the Mongolian worldview of a harmonious balance between all beings. Mongolians practice this ritual to please the land and ancestral spirits, strengthen the relationship between humans and spirits, and pray for the prosperity of the grassland and animals. One of the interviewees believes that the region’s current challenges (i.e., desertification, severe sandstorms, and frequent extreme weather events) are the consequence of a state of imbalance caused by human misbehaviour (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 9th). For instance, she posits that the primary driver of land degradation in the region is attributed to mining activities. She further stated that the environmental disruptions had intruded the spirits, resulting in a series of unfortunate events upon the grassland.

Additionally, Ovoo-related myths depict significant events of nature, human (mostly female) and animal deities, and how they protect the grassland and local people. They are the foundational building blocks and tools for communicating the Mongolian worldview. As one of the interviewees, a researcher of the Ovoo offering ritual stated, these stories work as an old teaching method to tell children the importance of nature (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 3rd.2021).

### ***The role of Ovoo in bridging networks of reciprocity***

The Ovoo offering ritual further helps build networks and relationships of trust and reciprocity that define social capital. In Mongolian pastoral society, herders rely on relations and social networks to share resources such as pastures, gain information, build new institutions, and create collective norms to increase their adaptive capacity to climate variability or other environmental changes (Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2011; Humphrey & Sneath, 1999; Zhang et al., 2013). The Ovoo offering ritual, particularly the festival afterward, provides a joyful platform for Mongolians to come together to socialize, celebrate their tradition, and strengthen their collective cultural identity, altogether leading to strong and extensive social networks. As a herder said, there is little chance for relatives and friends to meet each other because of their daily work, and Ovoo offering rituals provide such opportunities (Anonymous 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 22nd.). In a similar note, another herder commented that the families she met through this event had provided her family their land for practicing ‘*otor*’ movement, a traditional mobility strategy that helps cope with severe weather events (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 9th.). In the case of adverse climatic conditions in one area, arrangements are made for herder families to use neighbouring pasture areas. Some families are renting seasonal pastures from other herders. Some herders combined their pastures by establishing cooperatives. This strategy provides an

important means of overcoming localized drought or winter disasters (Fernández-Giménez et al., 2015). This kind of collaborative strategy is increasingly common in Inner Mongolia after the land tenure reform. For example, in Xilingol, it has been found that herders whose contracted pastures are close to each other, or who have kinship or friendship relations, have joined together to reactivate the 'otor' movement on their allocated winter, summer, spring and autumn pastures based on an oral or written agreement among them. Moreover, encounters facilitated by the practice of the Ovoo ritual also create the best opportunity for herders to share and gain information concerning the weather, the way of managing rangeland and herds, and the experiences in handling extreme weather events, among many others.

Maintaining a social network of family, friends, and neighbours is critical to the success of herding, and the Ovoo ritual contributes to creating and strengthening such social capital. These networks, based primarily on generalized reciprocity, can allow herders to gain access to needed labour and receive essential resources (Janes & Chuluundorj, 2015). In that sense, the Ovoo offering ritual can help reduce herders' vulnerability to climate change through bridging networks of reciprocity.

### ***The role of Ovoo in promoting sustainable behaviours***

Ovoo offering rituals is critical in encouraging people to lead more sustainable lifestyles by directing individual behaviours. The grassland ecosystem provides crucial resources such as fodder and water to pastoral societies and supports herders in coping with highly variable and uncertain environments. Thus, sustainable management is embedded in Mongolian culture. For centuries, Mongolians have viewed the Ovoo, and nature in general, as equipped with agency and power to treat or punish the human world. Many customary rules for the protection of Ovoo sites have been established as a result of the respect and fear that they feel for it. As documented in the book Ujjimqin Ovoo worship, human misbehaviours, including digging holes, leaving trash behind, cutting young trees, and killing young and female animals during the Ovoo offering will anger the spirits, which will bring misfortunes to the land and the people (阿尔门德, 2004).

New rules and taboos have also been created due to the region's changes, such as modernization and biodiversity loss. The killing of the steppe marmot, for example, is forbidden in certain areas (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 22nd.). Several interviewees also mentioned the new restrictions on driving cars and a call for horseback riding during the Ovoo offering (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 3rd and March 27th.). These new emerging rules prove that Mongolians are not merely following customary rules but are also creating rules for the challenges they face, but according to traditional beliefs. Instead of viewing these rules just as Ovoo rules, many herders view them as a guide to a more sustainable future. One interviewee stated that he uses a mouthful of water to wash his face in order to save water (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 27th.) Another herder chooses to collect and burn dried dung for fuel instead of coal (Anonymous, 2021. Interview with herder by author. March 9th.) The household use of local sustainable energy sources, such as dried dung, can be one of the ways to mitigate the throughput of energy use.

## **Discussion**

This chapter explored the Ovoo offering ritual and its potential to transmit traditional worldviews, bridge networks of reciprocity, and promote sustainable behaviour. The findings suggest that the Inner Mongolian Ovoo offering ritual can contribute to local climate change adaptation in at least the following three ways.



Firstly, the Ovoo offering ritual can convey and reinforce the Mongolian holistic worldview, which in turn may prioritize adaptation strategies that recognize local knowledge and preserve local culture. According to Hulme (2014), the ‘thick’ accounts of moral reasoning behind most spiritual beliefs and values can give people a motivational force not mirrored by economics or science and other secular messaging, which helps develop culturally situated responses to climate change. In Inner Mongolia, herders are reviving the traditional mobility strategy, ‘*otor*,’ to cope with grassland hazards. The ‘*otor*’ movement is a traditional mobility strategy to manage the grassland and to cope with grassland disasters. However, since the implementation of the land tenure reform policy, the practice of this strategy has become harder. The return to the ‘*otor*’ movement rests on the fact that, according to the Mongolian worldviews, sticking to natural rules and getting along with nature is the best way to address the current environmental crisis. In contrast to this strategy, the central government in China has implemented different top-down adaptation strategies, including a grazing ban where the land will be fenced and forbidden for grazing from three months to one year for grassland restoration in Inner Mongolia. Although this grassland management strategy is often claimed as a success in alleviating land degradation (Qiu et al., 2020), some scholars have noticed its long-term negative impacts on grassland, including biodiversity losses and numerous negative social and economic impacts on local communities (e.g., Li & Huntsinger, 2011). This exemplifies how different beliefs and values may lead to different adaptation strategies.

Secondly, Ovoo offering rituals provide a community platform to bridge social capital and to increase the community’s cohesion and solidarity, which increases the resilience capacity of the whole community. The social networks that have been strengthened or built during Ovoo offering rituals help herders collaboratively overcome environmental hazards. The use of social capital has largely been documented in the literature to deal with many shocks. For example, the Mazungunye community in Zimbabwe relies on social capital to lend their livestock to their relatives and friends who have better grazing lands through the system called *kuronzera*, the destocking of livestock strategy (Nyahunda & Tirivangasi, 2021). Such a strategy allows them to respond to climate change impacts collectively. Reciprocal use of pastures and underlying social networks can also allow herders to use pastures efficiently and survive in regions with frequent climate hazards. In the same line of argument, Fernández-Giménez and her colleagues (2015) argue that social capital can play a crucial role in coping with harsh winters collectively among Mongolians. However, it should be noted that little attention has been paid to how spiritual rituals amongst Indigenous communities may foster social capital and its role in local climate change adaptation. For example, the collective ritual of Tungus in Siberia is believed to connect not only the local nomads but also very different actors, such as the regional governors. Through this gathering, different actors can discuss the reasons behind climate change and to find a solution to the changing environment (Lavrillier, 2013).

Thirdly, the Ovoo offering ritual can promote sustainable practices of local people, which can help them mitigate and adapt to climate change. The ritual encourages the conservation of the grassland ecosystem, and this may result in a build-up of nature towards climate change adaptation and resilience. In the face of climate change, the role of conservation becomes more critical to enhancing the adaptive capacity of local people (Reyes-García et al., 2021). For example, sacred sites of Indigenous Peoples can provide ecosystem services such as drinking water, carbon storage, and soil stabilization (Simms et al., 2006). Similarly, the findings of this case study show that customary norms of Inner Mongolia regulate and guide individual behaviours and thus protect grassland ecosystems, which is essential for providing material resources such as fodders and water to local animals and herders. In addition, the availability of well-preserved pasture lands is related to practices like the ‘*otor*’ movement. More importantly, these norms have been internalized by Mongolians and seem to regulate the way in which they interact with nature on a daily basis. For example,

Mongolians, like many other pastoral societies around the world, have used dung as a fuel source until now, which provides an option for sustainable energy production (Ramos-Suárez et al., 2019). In some societies, rituals can direct and encourage collective acts to balance the ecosystem. For example, the Kaiko ritual of the Tsembaga Maring of New Guinea plays a vital role in maintaining the animal–human–environmental balance to respond to environmental instabilities. During this ritual, local people will plant trees and hunt overpopulated pigs to maintain ecosystem balance.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the importance of Indigenous knowledge to climate change adaptation discourses and the need for further research on the topic. Findings from this work are valuable for future researchers because they dived into one largely understudied part of Indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual ritual, trying to connect it to climate change adaptation research. Rather than presenting the spiritual dimensions of Indigenous knowledge as barriers to climate change discourses, the case study shows that these dimensions are one of many crossing pieces of both individual and community identities that come together in various ways to influence community adaptive capacity, adaptation decisions, and outcomes.

Based on the results of this chapter, we suggest that policymakers recognize the potential for cultural responses to climate change that are locally meaningful and morally compelling. Different environments require different adaptations, and not every culture works towards a similar ‘norm’ of adaptation. As such, each culture has a unique pattern of ecological adaptation. To ensure effective local adaptation, the interventions of climate change policy and planning should reflect and respond to the local culture, including its values and beliefs. For example, instead of implementing a grazing ban policy to help the grassland regenerate, making traditional mobile grazing practice possible or integrating this idea into the policy planning might be a more culturally appropriate option for the ecosystem and the livelihood of the herders.

In Inner Mongolia, there is often a lack of communication between Indigenous Peoples and the government, which makes the integration of local knowledge and scientific knowledge very difficult. The Ovoo offering ritual can be a platform for the local government to participate and create a dialogue with Indigenous Peoples to discuss and plan for future adaptation actions collectively. Climate communication should not be exclusive and pluralistic approaches to climate change should be the future.

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