

Asocial memories, ‘poisonous knowledge’, and haunting in Mongolia

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This article argues that memories that come from contexts that are adversarial, and that are not always based on communication and sociality, should be better integrated within the existing theories of social memory. Shamans in postsocialist Mongolia claim that previously suppressed origin spirits demand that their descendants become initiated as shamans in exchange for ceasing to harass them for forgetting and abandonment. Some clients refuse to become initiated as shamans and thus choose to sever their relationship with their past. In this article I explore one such refusal, which led to a disintegration of existing social ties, while also yielding unexpected memories. These memories are different from the shared memories that emerge in the context of organized shamanic rituals. Circulated through rumour and supposition instead of positive sociality and sharing, these ‘asocial’ memories also act as a particular kind of ‘poisonous knowledge’, prompting each individual to withdraw from the network as a way of avoiding the alleged harm from unattended spirits. Owing to divergent subject positioning, where one person’s remembering is another’s forgetting, the haunting by unwanted memories continues, as resolution through unifying communal ritual is not possible.

Asocial memories

As Mongolian state socialism was collapsing in 1990, various religious practices – Buddhism, shamanism, and newly adopted Christianity, among others – proliferated all over the country.¹ According to the Buryat shamans, *ongons* (spirits of dead shamans), who had been dormant under state socialism, had now returned to wreak revenge on their descendants for forgetting them, and to nominate candidates to become initiated as shamans to continue their lineage. Buryats reacted sceptically at first, but many began to entertain the possibility that their misfortunes, especially economic hardships, might be the result of the ‘wrath of the forgotten *ongons*’ (Jokic 2008). Some became initiates and served their origin spirits (the spirits of their shaman ancestors) (*ug garval*).

During the rituals of worship, shamans make memories of the past. As shamans become possessed by spirits, they perform as historical personae, and relay narratives of the spirits’ lives to their audiences, thus creating sprawling and dispersed memories of the past. But when shamans renounce their calling, they effectively abandon their spirits and the accompanying memories. When abandoned, the spirits are said to degrade into the most vindictive class of spiritual beings, known as *uheer*. An outcome of forgetting,

an *uheer* is a spiritual emergency that needs urgent attention. This article explores one case of an unattended *uheer* and its impact on social remembering, which differs markedly from the forms of remembering that take place in the context of organized shamanic rituals.

The recent scholarship on Buryat shamanic practices in Dornod province explores the remaking of the past following the state suppression of religion and political violence during socialism. The Buryat communal rituals mend and create genealogies (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Shimamura 2014), reconstruct memories (Buyandelger 2013), and lead to innovation in ritual techniques (Swancutt 2006; 2008; 2012). These studies illustrate that shamanism has been a part of the Mongolians' larger drive to reconstruct their past after socialism, along with making memory objects and photographic collages (Empson 2011), rewriting official and communal histories (Kaplonski 2004), and rehabilitating the victims of political purges (Kaplonski 2014). Although these works do note contested and incomplete efforts at re-creating the past, more attention to instances of downright disagreement and avoidance would illuminate how studies of remembering can extend beyond the more conventional emphasis on positive sociality and memory-making in ritual or other communal spaces. *Uheer*, as an epitome of forgetting and disagreements, can be particularly useful in thinking about memories that participate in a disintegration of the communal.

In this article I explore memories that emerge around a woman named Altaa² who refuses to become initiated as a shaman. As Altaa forgoes her spiritual duties, her kin and neighbours become convinced that one of her family spirits has turned into an *uheer*. Altaa's network of kin and friends disintegrates, while their discourses about the *uheer* and attempts to avoid it generate memories that serve as alternatives to the ritually shaped shamanic ones. Instead of the narratives by shamanic spirits about their lives in the distant past, we get unfiltered and ritually unmediated memories based on the experiences of people who structure their lives around avoiding the *uheer*.

I argue that studies of social memory would be well served by attending to those aspects of cultural life that are *not* communal, that may, in fact, be adversarial. I show how memory is made through breaking down existing ties and by instigating avoidance and non-communication. Altaa's case reminds us that the 'social' is not a given or a 'bedrock of roles, norms . . . that determine or affect the order and diversity of human behavior' (Murakami & Middleton 2006: 282). 'Both memory and context are emergent, contingent formations' (White 2006: 332), and not unitary, but plural.

Back when Halbwachs (1925; see also 1992) coined the term 'collective memory', he inherited his mentor Durkheim's interest in societies' mechanisms for maintaining coherence against fragmentation and the displacements of modernity, and a partial nostalgia for allegedly disappearing traditional societies which were presumably based on collectivity and homogeneity. Halbwachs's emphasis on 'social groups' as opposed to individuals, and on mechanisms of transmission (i.e. rituals, families, churches), was groundbreaking in the mid-twentieth century, when memory was understood as an individual capacity.

Inspired by the notion of collective memory, many anthropologists have developed new pathways in studying people's attempts at reaching moral unity, sharing identities, and rebuilding communities in the context of oppression, violence, and displacement (Jing 1996; Sa'di & Abu-Lughod 2007; Slyomovics 1998). Some studies of spirit possession rituals show how they challenge dominant representations (Lambek 2002; Stoller 1994) and bring back pasts that are 'forgotten as history but remembered

as spirits' (Shaw 2002: 9). Studies of healing after violence emphasize the role of communal rituals in rendering memories of violence into tolerable representations, building collectivity, and imagining the community. For instance, in China following the Cultural Revolution, some communities identified 'wild ghosts' (Mueggler 2001) as perpetrators of state violence. In doing so, they distance traumatic memories while containing them within the moral boundaries of ritual practice. Many such rituals are about re-membling the community and 'reenvisio[ning] social relations' (Mueggler 2001: 157). In Kwon's multifaceted work (2008), roaming outcast spirits in Vietnam are integrated into kinship and landscapes, and appeased through renewed rituals, which subsequently brings together disparaged communities. All of these studies frame memory-making as a form of group action in response to internal violence or external intrusions, yet they eschew completely Halbwachs's assumptions about homogeneity, which allowed little room for 'divergent memories and counter-memories within a group' (Cole 2001: 23).

These studies emphasize processes towards unity and resolution and pay less attention to conditions of discord and animosity. In Mueggler (2001) and Kwon (2008), for instance, conflict and adversarial relations are mentioned as temporary preconditions that are being healed and attended to, as difficult memories are filtered through communal rituals. But what if disagreements and hatred are not resolved through acts of remembering, or even forgetting? What if, as scholars, we tend to be overly optimistic about the amicable nature of the 'social', when in many places around the world people live with continuous tensions and animosities? Without refuting works that centre on attempts at unity and shared remembering, in this article I want to take a close look at the memories that accompany discord and conflict. I call these memories 'asocial' because they have emerged from disagreements and lead to further disintegration of existing networks and relationships in everyday life. These memories are culturally comprehensible, as they are based on the 'publicly available symbols and meanings about the past' that make '*representations collective*' (Olick 2007: 6, original emphasis). Yet they are not equally meaningful to all members of a group. Because there is no unified agreement in dealing with those memories, they are neither agreeably remembered nor intentionally forgotten through rituals, as Battaglia (1992) illustrates in her study of mortuary rites among the Sabarl. I use 'asocial memories' because, while memories have proliferated, relationships have disintegrated. Instead of direct sharing and building communities as in social remembering, or deliberate and accepted forgetting (Bacigalupo 2010), asocial memories are left to circulate (and expand) through rumour and supposition (often despite attempts to suppress them), thus further exacerbating animosities. Although different from social remembering or forgetting among relatively like-minded people, asocial memories expand and transform the existing ways of remembering the past.

Theories of social memory can be expanded to account for the dynamics of memory in circumstances of social rupture or epistemological fracture. Expanding the 'social' to include negative sociality, where individuals have a shared history and culture but live in disagreement and avoidance, would help to accentuate the diversity of subject positioning in memory-making, especially during times of rupture and hardship. The works of anthropologists on shamanism in Mongolia (Buyandelger 2013; Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Shimamura 2014; Swancutt 2012) show that shamanism is neither distributed evenly nor accepted uniformly, and that many have to live with uncompleted rituals, unidentified spirits, and 'not-quite shamans' (Pedersen 2011) – that is, would-be

shamans who lack support and knowledge. Also, many Mongolian shamans reject their 'calling' initially, but accept it in the end. Altaa's case is one where memories did not make it through the rituals of incorporation, and thus I witnessed the emergence of memories outside the ritual sphere.

Her case also destabilizes an assumption about ritual as an unquestionably effective solution to the repercussions of violence and rupture. After decades of state suppression of religion, even the locals ask if the shamans are capable of solving their problems. Differential subject positioning towards shamans also contributes to the questioning of their credibility. I wish to attend to the instances when difficult memories do not make it through the rituals of incorporation or remembering, yet are not forgotten, even when individuals purposely attempt to do so. Thus I push my analytic of forgetting further, supplementing it with two additional notions: 'poisonous knowledge' and 'haunting'.

Das's notion of 'poisonous knowledge' (1997: 221) is helpful in describing how undomesticated memories of painful events haunt the present. Not forgotten, but also not shared, 'poisonous knowledge' manifests as a kind of submerged sensibility and is 'constantly mediated by the manner in which the world is being presently inhabited' (Das 1997: 221). This is knowledge that contaminates, often in uncommunicated ways, the lives of people with a shared, sometimes occulted, history. In Das, poisonous knowledge is secret and unspoken, but informs present actions. But in the Buryat case, the knowledge is not a secret, which creates problems of a different kind. Knowing Altaa's past, and especially its most problematic part, the *uheer*, proved to be poisonous. In their attempt to avoid the *uheer* and protect themselves, each party in her surrounding community cancelled their relationship with Altaa and each other, causing the attenuation of the whole social network. The more people talked about the *uheer*, thus proliferating the memories that Altaa wanted to forget, the more they all despised one another.

While 'poisonous knowledge' is a term that captures the impact of *uheer* on the disintegration of networks, the term 'haunting' helps us to grasp the process of ad hoc memory-making. 'Haunting' assumes the existence of a dominant framework (i.e. hegemony, in Derrida's [1994] context). In this case, the shamanic rituals and origin spirits are dominant, and the *uheer* is the haunter. 'Haunting' accommodates the disparate subject positioning of the dominant and marginal, and also conveys how the disjuncture between the two parties prevents *uheer* from being integrated into the more respectable spirit world. Let me explain this. Derrida (1994) takes 'haunting' beyond the manifestations of a subject's experience into the realm of the political.³ By engaging with a specific historical context, Derrida discusses how certain hauntings endure even when they have no continuing basis in reality: he cites the spectre of Marx, which persists even though we seem to have eschewed him and his teachings after the end of Soviet socialism. The past cannot be fully erased, and 'haunting' is a part of the structure of every hegemony (Derrida 1994: 34). The hallucination or simulacrum can be more real than a living presence (Derrida 1994: 32).

Based on this line of thought, it is possible to see how Altaa's situation serves as an alternative to the dominant shamanic ritual that is meant to homogenize contradictory subject positioning. *Uheer* – silent, empty, and forgotten outcasts – are the direct opposites of distinctive and eloquent origin spirits. Ideally, Altaa would have become a shamanic practitioner, then ameliorated her neglected origin spirits and taken care of the *uheer*. Had she contained the *uheer*, the surrounding community would (presumably) not have turned against her. But this did not happen. Altaa chose to forget and forgo all

things shamanic, and let the *uheer* loose to haunt the community. Haunting is a useful analytic here, as it helps us to realize that there is no uniformly agreed-upon formula for remembering or forgetting. In joining the notion of ‘poisonous knowledge’ to ‘haunting’, I argue that the traumatic past finds its realization by undermining existing social networks and severing kin relations.

Instead of the *remembering* that takes place when spirits are summoned to the shamanic rituals, I present the memories that emerged when there were no rituals and when the spirits were not placated, in the cases of three interrelated neighbours of Altaa: Dolgor, Tsetseg, and Baasan. As these women used the *uheer* to interpret their own misfortunes, their narratives revealed shreds of histories beyond the shamanic narratives. All three spoke not to each other, but to people outside their immediate circles. While Altaa can be read as representative of one dominant mode of response to the re-emergence of shamanism, I am more interested in using her condition diagnostically, to show how social memory can be made amidst conflict and refusal – and, indeed, in practices such as Altaa’s that are deliberately asocial.

Spirits and locals

In the fall of 1999, I settled in the town of Bayan-Uul in Dornod province, northeastern Mongolia, to conduct twelve months of fieldwork. Before settling down in the town of Bayan-Uul, I had travelled and lived with the families of shamans in the nomadic countryside that surrounds the town for three consecutive summers (1996–9). After my twelve months’ stay in 1999–2000, I returned for follow-up research in 2002–6 and then in 2017. The former school building where I lived in 1999–2000 contained eight (class)rooms, all occupied, so I had seven neighbouring households. I got to know six of the families within a few weeks. The seventh family – my neighbours across the narrow hallway – were Altaa, her husband Dorj, and their children and grandchildren. They limited their interaction with me to polite greetings. Altaa accepted my invitation to tea only half-way through my twelve months’ stay.

Gradually, I came to notice that Altaa’s family avoided other people in town, including my numerous visitors, and that everyone else behaved distantly towards her and her family. I had heard from several of my interlocutors that although Altaa was ‘chosen’ by her origin spirits to be initiated as a shaman, she had refused to go through with it. Without a shaman to pay them respect, these spirits, they explained, turned into *uheer* – the most malicious of beings. *Uheer* haunted Altaa’s family, and had even led her into destitution. Several people in Bayan-Uul whom I knew also kept an eye on Altaa, to see whether, or when, she would resign herself to becoming a shaman. In addition to worrying about the harms that the *uheer* might inflict on their families, a few shamans were competing to lead Altaa’s shamanic initiation.⁴ One female shaman even used to come by to my place from time to time to check if I had heard anything about Altaa’s preparations for her initial ceremony.

Because the Buryats I met believed that every Buryat family has shamanic ancestry and thus needs to produce a shaman to tend to the origin spirits, it was thought to be impossible for Altaa to reject her calling. She had every reason, according to the shamanic cosmology, to attend to her origin spirits. Just sponsoring rituals was not enough. She needed to become initiated as a shaman. Altaa’s refusal was incompatible with her identity as a Buryat. In Mongolia, haunting by *uheer* is not limited to individual perceptions through hallucinations or dreams. It is also made recognizable by visible misfortunes.

Altaa was the only survivor among her siblings, itself a proof that she was being haunted. Her family's destitution was another proof of being afflicted by *uheer*. Most people, especially middle-aged members of Altaa and Dorj's generation, even the poor, possessed at least a plot of land on which they could erect a *ger* (felt tent) and build a Buryat-style log house. Most had acquired such a living arrangement during socialism and then managed to keep it afterwards. But Altaa's family lived in the former school building, which had been built in the 1950s and was in many respects dilapidated beyond repair. Every time someone shut a door, handfuls of sand and cement poured down from different parts of the ceiling onto the inhabitants. Only people who had no other place to go stayed in that building.

Altaa was also the sole breadwinner. Her husband lost his job as a clerk when the state farm – the major source of livelihoods in the district – was dismantled in 1993. As a school cook, Altaa earned a stable but small salary (about \$40.00 a month). There were hardly any jobs in Bayan-Uul beyond a few state-sponsored positions at the hospital, school, police station, and in the administration, thus her salary actually placed her in a better-off situation than those who had absolutely no income. But then I discovered further reasons behind Altaa's poverty. The family took care of the children and grandchildren of her five deceased siblings. At least three dozen young people crowded Altaa's home during lunchtime. Some of these adult children had worked for the state farm but lost their jobs when socialism ended. There were no government or private sector jobs until later in the 2000s. Some of them tried petty trading, running a shop, raising livestock, and joining small ad hoc construction projects, but these were all temporary measures. Almost every day, Altaa would rush home during her lunch hour. In a 20-litre cast-iron pot she cooked milk tea with roasted rice or wheat flour and flavoured it with a pinch of dried meat or by boiling livestock bones in it – the best way to stretch out the ingredients.

Disrupted genealogy, forgetting, and *uheer*

Contrary to many locals' conviction that Altaa was poor owing to neglect of her spirits, she argued the opposite. It was precisely her poverty and misfortunes that disproved the claim that spirits were real. 'I have nothing to give to my spirits. If the origin spirits are real, they should see that and stop demanding things', Altaa told me over tea in my room.

Everyone here knows that my father was a shaman. They also see my poverty and my misfortunes. Apparently, I owe a sacrifice of a blue goat to my origin spirits. There is nothing mysterious about it. My mother and I ate the sacred goat that was designated for Dorlik [the deity of the smithy and blacksmithing] when we were displaced after my father was arrested and killed during the purges [of the 1930s].

Why, Altaa continued, despite the propitiation of their origin spirits, who were supposed to stop harming them and start helping, did the local Buryats remain destitute, ill, and dying? Like some locals, Altaa noticed that despite the spirits and the shamans' promises to help, nothing seemed to improve. Such lack of change prompted some people to pursue additional rituals. Altaa, on the contrary, decided to shun the shamanic practices. She was convinced that if the origin spirits were in fact so powerful, then they should help her first, before demanding the rituals of sheep sacrifice from someone who had nothing. Otherwise, the impoverished descendants were of no use to the origin spirits – there was often no way even to begin to be of use. Moreover, according to Altaa, even

if she were to be initiated as a shaman, she was not sure that she was willing to divert her resources from feeding her extended family to feeding the spirits. For Altaa, the shamans' proposition to remedy the broken connection between past and present in order to make her future possible was unfeasible not only because she had no means to act on it, but also because she doubted the spirits' authenticity and shamans' credibility.

Altaa was expressing a wider suspicion regarding the authenticity of spirits – it was a persistent belief that at least some of the spirits were invented by shamans seeking to profit from people's suffering. While in rhetoric, most Buryats approve of shamanism and respect their origin spirits, in practice, many are sceptical, especially when shamans require frequent rituals and demand large amounts of resources for conducting them, such as sheep, food, and money. If Altaa's mother had not chosen to eat the sacred blue goat after her father was purged in the 1930s, then everyone would have starved and the spirits would have been orphaned without any descendants. Altaa, therefore, chose to feed her deceased siblings' children and grandchildren instead of diverting resources to her initiation ceremonies and to feed the spirits. She had no interest in the shamanic way of remembering through laborious and resource-intensive rituals. This did not mean that she was forgetting about her deceased family members. Like other Mongolians, she kept photographs of them on her altar, and also, like others, she believed that the best way to honour the dead was to ensure that their children lived.

Amidst a wave of shamanic reconstructions of the past, however, renouncing shamanic incorporation proved to be impossible even with all the scepticism that accompanied it. The local Buryats argued that shamanic ancestry runs in every Buryat family. Once a spirit is located and connected with the descendants, there are no ritual mechanisms for rejecting or disassociating it without risky consequences for the living family members. This immortalization of origin spirits begins with shamanic mortuary rites, which combine the forgetting of shamans as persons with the creation and remembering of origin spirits. In this ritual transformation of the dead from a family member into 'a paradigm of sociological foreignness' (Taylor 1993: 654), forgetting and remembering are dialectically constituted. They are also accompanied by a transformation in emotional roles from those of parents and children to those of ancestors and descendants (Vitebsky 2008).

The origin spirits embody fragile memories and some do get forgotten or abandoned, which happened to Buryats through the displacements, political violence, and socialist suppression of the twentieth century. Locating and identifying origin spirits can be a difficult endeavour, as there is often no reference to check against. It is helpful to keep in mind that remembering is deeply associated with forgetting. While many works on spirits and memory emphasize remembrance and rebuilding, they are also about forgetting. For instance, acts of filtering, re-remembering, re-envisioning, and reintegration (Kwon 2008; Mueggler 2001) also require leaving out that which is harmful, and transforming pain into distanced and controlled representations. These studies suggest that remembering might be only the discernible part of the overall work of memory.

Despite the Buryats' widespread acknowledgement of forgetting owing to socialism and the determination of some people to include female spirits in their renewed genealogies, Altaa wanted to avoid shamanism altogether. As Carsten (1995: 325) shows, sometimes people are not interested in remembering their ancestors owing to marginalization and migration, situations in which the present is more important than the past and 'the horizontal ties of kinship' are more valuable than their depth.

This pragmatic reasoning partially applies to Altaa. In the midst of uncertainty about shamanic integrity and the harsh economic downturn after the fall of socialism, she preferred to build her future at the expense of the past.

From the shamanic point of view, Altaa's reasoning was incorrect, as building a future without attending to the past was self-defeating. At some point, spirits from the past would turn malicious and punish their descendants. Altaa's *uheer* was indicative of deeper trouble in her genealogical past, a skewed and broken relationship among several generations in the spiritual realm. Although Buryat spirits are heterogeneous, for the sake of clarity it is useful to distinguish three kinds of spirits that span various eras, and whose conditions inevitably affect other spirits.

First, there were origin spirits, who were made during the distant, presocialist past, and many of whom were abandoned during socialism. They were now returning to claim the commemoration due to them. Without a shaman to continue their lineage and to care for them, Altaa's origin spirits had become harmful towards their descendants. Within the spirit world, their power weakened and reputation suffered, and their capacity to look after subsequent generation of spirits, including the spirits from the socialist period, also diminished. Second, there were the spirits of shamans (or unrealized shamans) who lived during socialism, and whose souls were not made into origin spirits through mortuary rites owing to socialist suppression. Altaa's father was an example of the second kind of spirit. As a shaman who was killed during the state violence of the 1930s, he was not made into an origin spirit through the proper rituals. Left weak and wandering, he needed rituals to be performed so he could become a proper origin spirit. Third, there are the souls of ordinary individuals (non-shamans) who have been kept off the Buddhist spirit track of rebirth by a lack of both rituals from the living and guidance from previous spirit generations (themselves weakened owing to the suppression of ritual). It is mostly this last category of souls, which lacked support from the living and from older spirits, that became *uheer*. Without a comprehensive restoration of the spirit genealogy, the production of *uheer* was almost inevitable.

Sociality, state, and shamanic rituals

The above-mentioned disruption in the spirit genealogy was a result of a century of political violence, and indicative of a larger suppression of social memory. Forms of social remembering among the Buryats of northeastern Mongolia have varied throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Buryats are the only migrant ethnic group in the country. They are the descendants of the Buryats who came from the Russian part of Buryatia during the early twentieth century in order to escape the turmoil of Russia's Civil War (1905-7), the October Revolution in 1917, and finally Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s. Yet, once they arrived, they were brutalized more than any other group as Mongolia went through its own version of Stalin's political violence.⁵

The state suppression of shamanism led to a disruption both of shamanic practices and in the production of ancestral, genealogical memory. The socialist state also controlled other forms of remembering, like genealogical records, archives, written accounts, and oral narratives. Pushed underground and forcibly attenuated, shamanic rituals were far from being a dominant remembering practice during socialism. The state propagated its homogenizing narrative of socialist modernity. It excluded Buryat histories, discounted histories embedded in shamanism, and suppressed individual memories that did not fit the official narrative. The state also ordered the fabric of everyday sociality through the organization of space, time, labour, and events.

Behind the state rituals and celebrations, however, paranoia and the largely silenced memories of state violence still influenced interpersonal relations among Mongolians at large. Sociality under socialism was not necessarily riddled with open antagonism, but it was not fully amicable either. Anthropologists (Højer 2004; Humphrey 2002; Swancutt 2008) have written about the contentious textures of sociality after socialism. Yet some neighbourly and kin tensions were present during socialism as well and were not caused by the new capitalist order alone, though they were influenced by it. I note these undercurrents of animosity and rivalry as an addition to social memory studies that emphasize people's efforts at communicating, maintaining networks, and attending gatherings (Bacigalupo 2016; Cole 2001; Connerton 1989).

When the state withdrew its control over religious practices after socialism, shamanic practices proliferated. As clients contested the credibility of shamans, the latter competed to legitimate their power. Many shamans in places like Bayan-Uul, including successful and credible ones, were constantly searching for new clients and disciples in order to expand their political and economic power. The shamans were also becoming aware that some parts of mainstream culture, including the media, performance arts, and the state in its rituals, were adopting elements of shamanism as an identity adornment.⁶ Local shamans strived to be included in these nation-wide representations. Shamanic rituals also helped to resurrect memories of kinship ties with Buryats in Russia (Empson 2011) and fuelled an ethnic revitalization among Mongolian, Chinese, and Russian Buryats across national borders (Shimamura 2014).

But the shamanic proliferation has been fraught with conflict and inconsistencies. In most rituals that I attended, as in the rituals observed by Delaplace (2014), the shamans and the spirits were full of contempt, anger, and insults. Moreover, instead of resolving issues, some rituals created more misunderstandings and problems – which then required additional rituals to deal with (Buyandelger 2013). Yet, regardless of their disposition, the spirits always had stories to tell about their lives in the past. In other words, shamanic ritual after the collapse of socialism, with all its contentions taken into account, had become the context and mechanism for social remembering. The rituals fulfilled these roles by enabling integration, communication, sharing and distributing information, and by bringing people and spirits together, all of which could be seen as a framework of collective remembering (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992). In contrast, Altaa's refusal, as I will detail, placed memories within an opposed context of non-communication, avoidance, and communal disintegration.

'Poisonous knowledge' #1: Witnessing death

Das (1997) develops the notion of 'poisonous knowledge' in order to redirect anthropological thinking about traumatic memory. She is interested not in what people say about 'what happened', but rather in how the memory of a traumatic event inhabits the present instead of possessing one's past. She demonstrates this through an analysis of the life of a Punjabi widow named Asha, who, after the Partition of India in 1949 and the creation of Pakistan, remained with her deceased husband's family. They treated her with love, but one family member, though discreet, also pursued her sexually. After years of silent torment, Asha married again as a way to escape the situation. The extended family reacted badly to her remarriage. Asha was able to keep her secret, but it became 'poisonous knowledge', as acting on it turned love into hatred.

Altaa's situation brings to us a different kind of poisonous knowledge. Unlike Asha's secret, Altaa's knowledge about her *uheer* was public. Altaa wanted to make it disappear

so that others would forget it too. Instead, shamans wanted to guide her through the initiation process. Altaa's choice to shun the shamans teaches us that individuals do not necessarily accept all cultural practices, especially in cultures that are undergoing dramatic transformations.

When Altaa refused to attend to her origin spirits, they began to appear among her neighbours and kin as malicious *uheer*. In this part of the article, I examine the narratives of Dolgor, Altaa's kin and neighbour, who claimed to be afflicted by the *uheer*. Dolgor was a retired elementary school teacher who was widowed at the age of 33 and lived with her four grown-up daughters in a house about 400 yards from the old school building where Altaa's family (and I) lived. Dolgor had become an expert in all things shamanic by assisting her 20-year-old daughter in becoming initiated as a shaman. Owing to her closer relationship with Altaa in the past, and her interest in all things shamanic, she had the most extensive stories. Dolgor was also the first person who identified the *uheer* to me. One night after a long day of attending rituals together in late 1999, she and I had dinner in my room. As she lit up her cigarette, Dolgor suddenly said: 'You know, your neighbour, Altaa, is my relative. Her late sister and I were the two brides in the same family; she was married to my husband's brother'. Before I could ask a question, she continued:

Altaa's faith is askew. That is because her origin spirits demand a shaman but none of the family members have agreed to be initiated. All five of Altaa's siblings died young because the origin spirits took their lives as revenge for refusal and abandonment. One of her sisters, Tuya, was married to my husband's brother. She had a tumour in her uterus and the doctor asked for her consent to 'burn' it. The doctor also noted that the cancer was very close to one of the main nerves and was cautious about the treatment. I should have stopped her from consenting to it. The day after the procedure, she felt tingling in her legs, and in a few days she became immobile. She died more from depression and immobility than from the cancer. Tuya's soul never left the human world, and has now turned into an *uheer*. Because I was her kin, the *uheer* haunts me. Altaa is the last of the six siblings left alive.

From the tone of Dolgor's voice, I sensed that even though Tuya died back in the 1980s, she was still grieving and feeling remorse about not having been able to help her. Later on, I learnt that Dolgor had held all kinds of rituals to appease Tuya's *uheer*. But her rituals were not as effective as they would have been if performed by Tuya's close or blood-related kin. In this case no one fitted that description but Altaa. Dolgor criticized Altaa for not taming the *uheer*. 'She [the *uheer*] can enter my house any time', says Dolgor. 'She wears a black *deel* [traditional Mongolian robe] and a white headscarf and sits on the floor leaning against the side of my bed. I can see her and it is really disturbing.'

In much of Mongolian spirit cosmology, *uheer* is a term for a malicious spirit that is not easily identifiable, that has lost its recognizable features in the community. The process of identifying them can take endless repeated rituals, usually involving an identification and appeasement of the rest of the shamanic lineage (*ug*), since an *uheer* is only the tip of an iceberg of abandoned lineage. And even then there is little guarantee that the *uheer* will vanish. Buddhist lamas offer rituals of suppression (*darah*). They, too, however, are aware that if the root of the problem is not fully addressed in the shamanic realm, their rituals are temporary solutions.

That same night, Dolgor told me about her husband's death. He was a district official and was an ethnic Khalkha (the dominant ethnic group), not Buryat. It appears that he was engaged in an ongoing conflict with some local people, about which Dolgor knew little. One night, two weeks after Dolgor gave birth to the twins who were their

ninth and tenth children, two men came to their house. They stayed for a long time, eating, drinking, and talking. When, late that night, Dolgor returned to her house from doing chores in her yard, she saw that one of the men was gone and the other one was holding her husband down on the floor, twisting his arm behind his back. Dolgor wrestled with the man, but in vain, and so ran out to fetch help from her neighbours. When she came back with them, however, it was too late. Her husband had a high fever for the rest of the night, his arm was badly injured, and, as Dolgor guessed, he had internal injuries. He died right before sunrise. While such murders are highly unusual, Dolgor never managed to get the local police to arrest the culprit(s). They dragged out the investigation, made constant excuses for their delays and failures, and requested more and more information, which Dolgor became tired of supplying without an outcome.

I thought that Dolgor told me the memory of her husband's death because she was saddened about Tuya's death. While Tuya's soul turned into an *uheer*, Dolgor's husband's soul did not, even though his life ended prematurely and violently. A part of the reason why Dolgor's husband's soul did not return to her or her children as a spirit was because he was not a shaman, and he was not a Buryat, but a Khalkha. Non-shamans' and non-Buryats' souls take a Buddhist path to rebirth, not the shamanic path that involves a return to its descendants as spirits.

Dolgor blamed herself for being unable to save Tuya and her husband. This sense of guilt extended to both deaths, although she never explicitly connected her husband with Tuya in this way. She kept him, an ethnic Khalka, entirely separate from the shamanic world of spirits and rituals that she pursued.

This instance of Dolgor's remembering of her husband's death, juxtaposed with the shared memory of Tuya the *uheer*, forms exactly the sort of juncture that can cause an *uheer* to trigger additional memories. Empson (2007) makes a nuanced point about the ways in which collective memory is produced while being supplemented by individual experiences. Following Arnheim (1974) on the role of the visual in perception, she argues that in recalling, we always bring up something that we have *seen* before, perhaps something related to our own past, because there is a relationship between seeing and perceiving (Empson 2007: 59). This insight is especially telling for Dolgor's case, as she witnessed Tuya's death, and thus could identify the *uheer* that she became – a shared memory, albeit asocial and undesired. In addition, by relating her strictly personal memory of her husband's death to the *uheer*, Dolgor has expanded and strengthened the asocial memory for herself. While the memory of Dolgor's husband was not dispersed around Bayan-Uul as was Tuya's *uheer*, it did help reinforce her memory of Tuya. Dolgor animated the memories that Altaa was trying to forget. Stated differently, Altaa's forgetting was Dolgor's remembering. This was not because Dolgor wanted to remember. She needed to forget as well, in order to dispel Tuya's *uheer*. Having witnessed the suffering and death of Tuya, Dolgor retained vivid memories of her, which she connected to the death of her husband, further solidifying both memories' impact on her everyday life. But in order for Dolgor to lessen the intensity of her memories, Tuya's *uheer* required an intervention from Altaa, which the latter refused to engage in. Angered and frustrated, Dolgor avoided Altaa, even though they lived just 400 yards or so from each other, because she was worried that interacting with her might increase the potency of the *uheer*. Altaa knew that Dolgor resented her, and avoided her, too. But Altaa was already avoiding almost everyone, lest someone ask her if she had become initiated as a shaman.

This breakdown of social ties as members of the community avoided each other was the work of poisonous knowledge. It also influenced Dolgor's daily life; she often claimed to have seen Tuya's *uheer* around her house, which made her feel depressed and physically feeble. Instead of consulting religious practitioners or even friends and acquaintances, she became dependent on the *uheer* to explain many of her misfortunes, from domestic violence to her daughter's problem with alcohol. The *uheer's* transformation from a singular bad spirit into a conceptual tool that could explain things beyond its original context speaks to Das's idea of how the repercussions of political violence come to permeate the world and affect kinship. Witnessing death conditions the subject, as Das (1997: 208) argues, to inhabit the world in a posture of mourning, not transgression. Dolgor, who had witnessed two deaths, could not make them tolerable through ritual. Instead, she engaged with them through 'knowing by suffering', because 'to grasp either a love or a tragedy by intellect is not sufficient for having real human knowledge of it' (Nussbaum 1986: 46; cited in Das 1997: 221). For Dolgor, who had witnessed two premature and unfair deaths, and who had suffered from guilt and helplessness, the way of knowing by suffering had strengthened both her personal and collective memories.

'Poisonous knowledge' #2: Avoidance

Poisonous knowledge causes avoidance, and in this Buryat case it became contagious. The *uheer* was a liability for Dolgor in spaces beyond her home and even restricted her relationships with people other than Altaa. It appears that before Tuya (the *uheer*) died, she rented a spare house from Dolgor's next-door neighbours, Tsetseg and her husband Ganba. After Tuya's death, her *uheer* remained in that spare house because Tsetseg and Ganba did not conduct the rituals necessary to evict her. Dolgor hoped to keep the *uheer* away by avoiding their compound:

I have to avoid Tsetseg's family and their compound altogether. Tsetseg is oblivious, and she does not realize that her misfortunes are related to the *uheer*. Her husband fell off the bridge a few years ago and now is in constant pain and almost immobile. There is no happiness in a house where an *uheer* stays. If Altaa had become a shamanic officiate, her sister probably would not have died to begin with. Or at least, after she died, she would not have become an *uheer* to torment us, because the properly propitiated origin spirits would have taken care of Tuya's soul after her death and would not have let her turn into an *uheer*.

I was well acquainted with Tsetseg, her husband Ganba, and their three sons. I almost rented out Tsetseg's spare house before renting the room in the former school building. 'I know that you checked Tsetseg's spare house for possible renting', Dolgor told me, as if she read my mind. 'But the *uheer* would not afflict you as much. She [the *uheer*] would trouble me, so I probably could not have visited you as freely as now'. So now Dolgor, Altaa, Tsetseg, and Ganba, and their respective families, all avoided each other, even though they lived next to each other.

Another person who avoided Altaa and Dolgor, as well as Tsetseg and Ganba and the rest of their families, was Baasan. She was a cousin of Tsetseg's husband, Ganba (the *uheer's* landlord). Baasan's compound was also adjacent to Dolgor's and Tsetseg's. I learnt about Baasan's issue with Altaa independently of Dolgor. Baasan told me:

Tsetseg and Ganba's guesthouse is saddled with the *uheer* of their former tenant [Tuya]. She gives me headaches and makes me sick in other ways, too. I am worried about my cousin [Ganba]. He is in bad health, but I cannot visit him or offer my help. If Altaa does not worship her origin spirits and ask them to remove the *uheer* of her sister, we are all going to be affected by misfortune. I try not to go over to their [Tsetseg and Ganba's] house because the *uheer* might follow me home. Dolgor was a

sister-in-law of the *uheer*. Dolgor is just as troubled by the *uheer*'s presence as I am. I must avoid her [Dolgor], too, because she was close to her [Tuya]. Every time I have gone to Tsetseg and Gamba's house it has given me a headache and my family members have gotten sick.

Baasan's life was somewhat similar to Altaa's, except for the slightly fewer number of people she fed. She was also the only survivor of a large family; her eight siblings died at various times due to illness and accidents. Baasan did not marry in her youth, was childless, and met her first husband only in the late 1990s, when she was in her late fifties. When her last surviving brother died in 1997, she consulted shamans in an effort to understand the multiple deaths in her family. Because the widow of Baasan's brother had no income, Baasan suggested that her eight nieces and nephews live with her in her two-room house.

Baasan saw herself as plagued by her forgotten origin spirits and believed that she needed no additional spirit-related trouble in her already demanding life (see Buyandelger 2013). While there were many occasions when Tuya's *uheer* reminded her of her personal memories, she chose not to pursue those connections in her narratives. This was because Baasan had a distinct project of narrating to me her search to find the reasons behind her family misfortunes and wanted to concentrate on that. She shunned the *uheer* in pursuit of her personal memory project, in addition to avoiding it for its generally damaging properties. Baasan, like Dolgor, was an active shamanic client. Both women sponsored rituals independently from each other. Afterwards, they would protect their post-ritual cleanliness by avoiding each other even more carefully, just in case the other was 'poisonous' as a result of encountering the *uheer*.

As mentioned, Tsetseg and her family already avoided Altaa. She was well aware of all the talk about Tuya, who was her former tenant. She also knew about the ritual activities in her neighbours Dolgor's and Baasan's houses and the fact that these neighbours avoided her compound because they were certain that the *uheer* of Tuya remained in Tsetseg's spare house. Tsetseg scoffed at Baasan and Dolgor, regarded their behaviour as superstitious, and chose not to communicate with them. Tsetseg, however, was not an atheist or against shamanism. One day, while sitting under a gazebo in her backyard outside her log house, she showed me a sheet of paper with a shamanic genealogical tree that traced her family origin all the way back to the mythical ancestor of the Buryats, Barga Bagatur. It was new and hand-drawn, and she said that she managed to copy her section of the genealogy from a relative whose family had preserved their family tree during the 1930s, when the state confiscated genealogies. Tsetseg was content that the genealogy looked complete and that there were no missing origin spirits. She considered herself well protected by her origin spirits and not easily vulnerable to ghosts, including Tuya's *uheer*.

I have presented some of the ways in which Altaa's three sets of neighbours imagined the *uheer* haunting and harming them. The three families' compounds were adjacent to each other, while Altaa lived in the former school building a few hundred yards away. When I first arrived in Bayan-Uul in 1996, I met Baasan at Tsetseg's house over a tea and a friendly conversation. And Tsetseg's husband Ganba, their two sons, and their dog walked freely among the adjacent compounds of Dolgor and Baasan. By the year 2000, none of these neighbours and kin visited or talked to each other.

I happened to be in a neutral but advantageous position in relation to the flow of stories about the *uheer*. I discerned a pattern in which the memories of Tuya that Altaa wanted to forget found public realization in her neighbours' narratives. Moreover,

because I was closely acquainted with all three women (Dolgor, Baasan, and Tsetseg), I noticed how they used the *uheer* either to interpret their own life issues or to recall memories of their own suffering: Dolgor's husband's death, Tsetseg's husband's injury, and Baasan's preoccupation with the death of her brother.

Even though these women did not communicate with each other directly, their family stories incorporated each other's narratives. In part this was because of the rumour vine outside of their immediate neighbourhoods that circulated and recirculated their stories, albeit in a very roundabout manner, so that it took a while for the stories to 'return' (or at least for me to notice their repetition). The narratives that these women told me also served as another form of protection, as it is through them that they legitimated their shunning of Altaa as well as the *uheer*. Thus, instead of remembering by maintaining social networks, through communication, and participating in rituals, these women's remembering severed their relationships by encouraging avoidance, as each associated her own problems with the *uheer*.

As my stay in Bayan-Uul was nearing an end in 2000, the country's socioeconomic situation was grim and conditions in the town only worsened. The community was also ridden with competition, jealousies, and assumptions of malice. I could overhear insolent speech about Altaa from various residents as I walked through the town's food market. Many people were contemplating leaving Bayan-Uul to escape destitution, and some began to send their grown-up children to find better prospects in the city of Ulaanbaatar. Altaa had no relatives to take care of her in Ulaanbaatar and could not leave her job and extended family. But a few of her children and nephews started working as artisanal miners, known throughout the country as 'ninjas'.⁷ During the official mining boom that started around that time, some of Altaa's family moved to Oyu-Tolgoi, a mining town in the Gobi desert, and ran a small shop.⁸ But most of the family returned to Bayan-Uul during the subsequent economic downfall after 2012. Even their troubles with local spirits, which resulted in various accidents and financial difficulties, did not persuade Altaa to become initiated as a shaman.

Altaa retired around 2010 and continued to live in Bayan-Uul, although she travelled a few times to visit her children in Ulaanbaatar and Oyu-Tolgoi. The relocation and dispersal of many Bayan-Uul residents starting in the 2000s in search of better livelihoods had quieted the discourses that surrounded *uheer*. Altaa's surrounding community, especially the families of all three women I discussed in this article, had dispersed physically after falling apart socially. They all moved to different parts of the city of Ulaanbaatar. Dolgor and her younger daughters came to live with her older daughters in 2005. Tsetseg retired in 2007 and joined her sons, who had found jobs in their maternal uncle's small business. Baasan had also moved to Ulaanbaatar with her husband in 2008. When I saw each of these women in subsequent years, they lived in different parts of the city and had not kept in touch with each other.

Conclusion

In this article, I have invited us to expand on the notion of social memory by including asocial memories – those memories that emerge in the context of hostility, adversary, and non-communication. Asocial memories are based on common symbols and representations, but they circulate not through direct communication and sharing but through rumour and assumption. These memories can also be seen as a form of poisonous knowledge as they can lead to the disintegration of existing relationships and other negative effects.

By investigating the case of Altaa, who refused to become a shamanic initiate, I have revealed how memories can break apart existing communities. Convinced that Altaa's unattended spirits had transformed into *uheer*, the surrounding community avoided her, and each other, for fear of contamination. In place of the memories of origin spirits filtered through ritual, I witnessed memories triggered by the desire to avoid *uheer*. More attention to this kind of memory helps us to think about diversity, sociality, agency, and how individuals recall shared memories in the context of their own experiences and knowledge. An attention to negative sociality helps to highlight memories that emerge beyond the frameworks of social remembering, especially in societies that are associated with collectivity and kinship. At the current time of economic and political displacement, it is necessary to consider the uncomfortable situation of living together, but with little unity or positive sociality.

The notion of haunting connects histories of violence and contradictory subject positionings to the shared but unwanted *uheer*. With their constant inquiries about Altaa's initiation and by connecting their personal hardships and memories to *uheer*, the locals kept unwanted memories alive. None of them could forget the *uheer* because they structured their lives around efforts to avoid it. They were remembering against their will. As part of this forced remembering, they adopted the *uheer* conceptually, to make sense of their own misfortunes. At the same time, they could not contain the *uheer* through shamanic rituals that would render it into a positive representation, as this effort had to come from Altaa.

The *uheer* leads to the weaving of discursive barriers. Forgotten or suppressed knowledge about the unpleasant past eventually becomes not only 'poisonous' but also infectious. Fear of that infection causes people to build 'fences around themselves' (Das 1997: 209). Yet remembering lays beyond the social framework – in this case the shamanic rituals and neighbourly and kin communication – and in the realm of asociality, avoidance, and hostility.

'Poisonous knowledge' thrives when it is entrenched in everyday conduct, and new facts are constantly subsumed under its conceptual influence. 'Poisonous knowledge' fills in the epistemological rupture that occurred after the fall of socialism, but it does so by causing social circumstances to deteriorate. The diverse content of 'poisonous knowledge', and the disparate positioning of the people associated with it, is what makes it so powerful against the filtered and transformed memories that emerge from ritual. While the *uheer* does not itself speak, it prompts the living to speak. And in contrast to origin spirits, whose historical narratives unify and circulate easily, the *uheer* resurrects and sustains individual memories that do not make it to the ritual arena.

NOTES

I would like to thank Christopher Kaplonski, Heather Paxson, Stefan Helmreich, Caroline Humphrey, Graham Jones, Anna Mariella Bacigalupo, Rosalind Shaw, Byron Good, Justin Dyer, the *JRAI* Editor, Elizabeth Hallam, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions for improving the manuscript. Fieldwork for this project was funded by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, a Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Research Fellowship, the Matsushita Foundation, and MIT's Class of 1956 Career Development Professorship Grant.

¹ State socialism in Mongolia lasted from 1921 to 1990. The state's anti-religious project culminated in the 1930s and continued in a less violent way until the end of socialism in 1990.

² I use pseudonyms throughout.

³ This is in addition to the more direct meaning of the manifestations of the *Uheer*, which are uncanny, 'ambiguous', and 'partially perceptible' (Lincoln & Lincoln 2015: 196).

⁴ See Buyandelgeriy (2007) for discussion of the Buryats' worries about the agencies of unidentifiable spirits.

⁵ For the accounts of political violence, see Kaplonski (2014).

⁶ For instance, the Mongolian production company Hero Entertainment broadcast a programme titled *Monk tenger* (The eternal sky), which calls for embracing shamanic identity in order for the country to regain its 'powerful existence' from the past.

⁷ See High (2017) on artisanal mining in Mongolia.

⁸ See Bonilla (2017) and Bulag (2009), among others, on the official development of mining in Mongolia.

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Souvenirs asociaux, « savoir toxique » et hantises en Mongolie

Résumé

L'auteure plaide pour que les souvenirs qui naissent de contextes hostiles et qui ne se fondent pas toujours sur la communication et la socialité soient mieux intégrés dans les théories existantes de la mémoire sociale. En Mongolie postcommuniste, les chamanes affirment que les esprits originels réprimés par le passé exigent que leurs descendants soient initiés au chamanisme ; alors, ils cesseront de les harceler pour les avoir oubliés et abandonnés. Certains des clients des chamanes refusent d'être initiés et rompent ainsi leurs liens avec leur passé. L'article explore un de ces refus, qui a entraîné la désintégration des liens sociaux tout en mettant au jour des souvenirs inattendus, différents des souvenirs partagés qui émergent au cours des rites chamaniques organisés. Propagées par la rumeur et les suppositions et non par la socialité positive et le partage, ces souvenirs « asociaux » constituent une sorte de « savoir toxique » qui pousse chaque individu à s'isoler du réseau afin d'éviter le mal que les esprits négligés pourraient censément lui infliger. Du fait de ces subjectivations divergentes, où le souvenir d'une personne est l'oubli d'une autre, les souvenirs indésirables continuent à hanter car la résolution par le rituel communautaire unificateur n'est pas possible.

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