

Rhythms of *nutag* *Slowness and Deceleration in Inner Asian Mobilities*

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Abstract

While Henri Lefebvre used his rhythmanalysis for analysing urban spaces and the effects of those rhythms on the inhabitants of those spaces, I attempt to apply it to a more rural and non-European environment, the comparatively small and familiar space of a Mongolian *nutag*. Case studies based on oral and written Buryat and Barga Mongols' accounts demonstrate that entering the spiritually thick atmosphere of the *nutag* (crossing its borders) requires a certain slowing down and tactical deceleration to adjust to local rhythms. To examine the hierarchy of the various contingent forces that influence people and their movement either in their own or in *khari nutag* [foreign land], I elaborate host–guest relations into a triangulated arrangement of relations between *ezed* masters, guests and the locals. To borrow an expression from physics to add to our analytical vocabulary of writing on slowness and deceleration, each *nutag* appears to be a sort of a 'viscous medium' with different rhythms and fluids creating more drag on objects (people) moving through it.

Keywords

rhythmanalysis – Lefebvre – Barga Mongols – Buryats – *nutag* – homecoming

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It is easy to penetrate the atmosphere quickly and burn up like a meteor.
The problem is to enter slowly.

ROBERT WALKER (2017)

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1 Introduction

Since Henri Lefebvre's 1992 claim that 'Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and expenditure of energy, there is *rhythm*' (emphasis added) (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 15), critical anthropologists and geographers have been preoccupied with thinking about the relationships between multiple temporalities of places and forms of mobility, the processes that flow through and reproduce and reconstitute place, the regulation and synchronisation of mobilities, as well as the contestation and multiple mobilities that interweave in and through place. As Tim Edensor pointed out in his recent *Rhythms and Arrhythmia*:

Yet though dynamic rhythms foreground the fluidity of place, they also provide certain consistencies, a 'polyrhythmic ensemble' (Crang, 2001) of processes that continuously reproduce place, including the rhythmic mobile flows which generate ephemeral, contingent and relatively stable arrangements of people, energy and matter. Accordingly, one way of understanding place is to distinguish the particular ensemble of rhythms of varying regularity, the multiple '*bundles, bouquets, garlands* of rhythms' (Lefebvre, 2004: 20), whether 'slow or fast, syncopated or continuous, interfering or distinct' (ibid.: 69), that produce spatial and temporal fluidity but also the repetitions and regularities that become the tracks to negotiate urban life.

EDENSOR 2014: 163

And again: 'While spaces, timings, materialities and mobilities are orchestrated to provide "relatively smooth 'corridors' for some" (Sheller and Urry 2006: 213), for others, travelling rhythms are far from smooth and there may be "disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility"' (Edensor 2014: 210). And yet again, perhaps most suggestive for future directions of rhythmanalysis: 'It also may be profitable to assess the entangling of somatic, mechanical and spatial rhythms in terms of their production of eurhythmia and arrhythmia, and understand the productive and destructive effects of the various mobile rhythms that flow through and constitute place' (Edensor 2014: 169).

Although Lefebvre used his rhythmanalysis for analysing urban spaces and the effects of those rhythms on the inhabitants of those spaces, building on his analysis I want to move it from the urban space to a more rural and non-European environment, the comparatively small and familiar space of a

Mongolian *nutag*.¹ Unlike the urban space, a *nutag* has a relatively stable arrangement of people, and is also filled by noises and its own rhythms of seasonal and daily routines and community events, aligned with the repetitive cycles of seasonal semi-nomadic migrations and biological mobile rhythms for domestic animals. I see this contribution as an effort to think about the rhythms of a *nutag*, how certain sites and interconnected spaces of *nutag*—local Buddhist temples, *oboo*, mountain passes (*davan*), pastures, local communities and villages, roads and footpaths—become venues for particular kinds of mobile rhythms, how they interweave through *nutag* space. Native to Aginsk and having an extended network of kin relatives dispersed across villages in the Aginsky district in the Transbaikal region of Russia, I will be talking subjectively about my own *nutag* and the ways I was taught to sense this ‘polyrhythmic ensemble’ in relation to people who share the *nutag*. Though kin, but still a ‘guest on the move’, I was expected to adjust to local rhythms every time I visited my kin in their small *nutags* and keep to their daily routine (e.g. the morning milking of cows, the noise of the house radio receiver at 6 A.M. and waking up together with a host family, or evening searches with my cousins for missing calves) and the seasonal routine, such as assisting adults in summer hay cutting and teenagers gathering chokecherry (*moihon*) from the far banks of the Onon River and making the dangerous return swim across the strong current with baskets full of cherries. It always was a mixture of collective and individual experiences, combining the fast rhythms with the slow pace: walking slowly up the hill with an elderly auntie to visit a local *oboo*, a half-day stop at grandmother’s *toonto nutag* in the Ulanzargantei valley near the Onon river, the fast rhythms of a shaman’s drum, the synchronised chants of lamas during religious ceremonies, or the almost suicidally dangerous car drives in the clouds of dust of a horse race to catch the fortune² embodied, as it is believed, in the spirit of the winning horse during the summer Surkharban.³ Probably my position of being neither a guest nor a host, but still a regular

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- 1 *Nutag* is not only a different territorial scaling such as birthplace (*toonto nutag*), homeland, or mother country, and the familiar landscape of homeland, but *nutag* is also the embodiment of different ways of existing, imagining and relating of humans with non-human Others inhabiting the domain of *nutag* (Bumochir 2019; Delaplace 2012, to name but a few).
 - 2 It is one of the popular rituals held during horse races, when spectators rush forward to absorb fortune brought by wind and dust swirling after the winning horse/horses. For more details, see Humphrey & Ujeed (2012).
 - 3 Analogous to the Mongolian *Naadam*, the Buryat *Surkharban* is a popular midsummer sports festival.

visitor to families of my uncles and *khuryakhee* [husband of a female relative] during summer holidays, was exemplified to me by Lefebvre in his writing about being simultaneously inside and outside: 'In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely and again, 'A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function' (Lefebvre 2004: 27). Later, with the course of time, my rhythmic return to these places once every few years, but by then accompanied by my own children, put me in the position of my parents and other senior kin, whose role was to help to sense and to distinguish the local rhythms and to adjust to the polyrhythmia of their various small *nutag/nutags* within the greater Aga homeland. Very likely my personal memories have created an idealised *nutag*, where multiple rhythms of places, events and people's trajectories co-existed in harmony and without dissonances, but in the meantime I have become more intrigued by tensions and conflicts, when the smooth running of rhythmic familiarity reveals awareness of changes, conditions 'out of synch', detachment and alienation.

Following this line of exploration further, this paper intends to reveal some temporal clashes and rhythmic experiences, which can produce destructive effects and arrhythmia, as well as harmonising techniques of culturally specific values and practices that surround them. My ethnographic cases present local understandings of the synchronisation of multiple mobilities, and their productive and destructive effects on the various mobile rhythms that flow through and constitute *nutag*.

In presenting my ethnographic cases I begin with a *dramatis personae* to group the characters methodologically in relation to *nutag* with a brief characterisation as the host (1), the guest/stranger (2) and the local (3). As a description of settings and scenery I take the scene set inside and outside *nutag*, where characters move in and out with different rhythms and experience various transitions (e.g. locals become strangers outside their *nutag*, or locals can ambivalently act as hosts and also can be treated by *ezed*⁴ hosts as strangers).

Let me first locate my *dramatis personae* in existing scholarship on hospitality in the European (for example, Derrida 2000) and non-European Inner Asian context (Da Col 2012; Humphrey, this issue) which base their analysis on the host–guest relations. However, my ethnographic material suggests the introduction of an additional transitional figure, 'the local', and the role 'the local' plays in social interaction in a given *nutag* through the prism of hospitality and *nutag* boundary-crossing. In brief, and to be explained later, the following

4 It is generally believed that pastures are traditionally not held as private property, since people associate land with spiritual and temporal agencies who are considered to be the 'owners', 'masters' (*ezed*) of the land on which people live.

cases dramatise these triangulated arrangements of relations between host, guest and the local in the following manner: the local acts as a human host in relation with the guest/stranger, but in relations with master spirits *ezed* (the real hosts) the locals understand themselves as guests, whose residence in the domain of a *nutag* is temporary due to the short temporality of humans and complicated patterns of Inner Asian migrations. The ambiguity of the local being between host and guest lies in the fact that the locals have been residing at this *nutag* long enough—in a less mobile position compared to guests—to adjust to the local atmosphere and to become habituated to (or in tune with) the temper and arrangements of the spirit host to become ‘custodians’⁵ of the *nutag*. Taking these three different sets of relations, I examine them in two ethnographic situations: the proper arrival of guests who were able to adjust themselves to the local rhythms (by slowing down), to be navigated through *nutag* under the guidance of locals, who in their turn introduced guests to the local *ezed* in a proper way to make their movement through the *nutag* secure, safe and respectful (Case 1); and the opposite situation (Case 2), when guests challenged the position of the locals as human hosts, when a guest’s agenda started dominating and disrupting local rhythms with some destructive effects. Consequently, there is a dangerous disconnection between guests, human hosts and *ezed*, resulting in a stressful arrhythmia of *nutag*.

Simultaneously, case studies presented in the paper look at modern ethnography collected in Buryatia and the TransBaikal region and use historical ethnographic methods, such as Barga Mongols and Buryat oral history recollections of the long-distance migrations and travels, to interrelate temporalities and rhythms of the past and present.

2 Taking on Rhythms of *nutag*: Tactics of Slowing Down

In November 2015 my uncle was arranging a wedding for his son. A *zurkhaich* lama (astrology specialist) consulted the lunar calendar to find an auspicious date for bringing a bride to a family. However, the astrological dates of birth for both—bride and groom—revealed some unfavorable conditions which the lama suggested needed to be neutralised by carrying out additional ritual

5 Some anthropological writings already employ words such as ‘custodians’ and ‘stewards’ to stress the subordinating role of humans to ‘masters of the land’ (*gazaryn ezen*) (Chabros 1992; Sneath 2002). For example, Rebecca Empson draws attention to the idea that ‘people are not the absolute owners but rather the “custodians” of the seasonal places where they live and that their residence in any place may be contested and challenged in various ways’ (Empson 2012: 6).

procedures. According to the lama, on the wedding day the bride's cortege (*khudaa uruguud*)—consisting of several respected members of her family—should arrive at the administrative border of Aginsk village from the favourable eastern direction no later than sunrise, before 7 A.M. The wedding cortege was asked to arrive at 6 A.M. so that there would be enough time for greetings and some ceremonial food and drink (Figure 1). All the requirements suggested by the groom's side brought additional inconvenience for *khudaa uruguud*, who had to spend two days travelling from a village in the Khorinski district in Buryatia to the neighbouring Transbaikal region with an extended detour so as to arrive in Aginsk from the auspicious direction. These requirements were accepted without hesitation. The future kin had to follow these rules of hospitality to ensure the future well-being of their daughter in her new family at a new *nutag*. On the groom's side, thoroughly navigating the right combination of time, place and even the direction of the bride's arrival provided a smooth 'arrival corridor' for a stranger who was going to join their family.

One possible interpretation of this arrangement to my mind was that, notwithstanding some unfavourable conditions of their *nutag* towards strangers at a given moment, local hosts were able to reorganise and regulate the guests' arrival by making it less visible (before sunrise), away from the principal rhythmic flows concentrated along the main road (federal highway A-166 which penetrates Aginsk from the north to the south) and the hosts could still honour their guests' arrival with respectful ceremonies. Probably the inaudibility of the travelling guests' rhythms (the bridal cortege was small in number and did not stay long—the bride's relatives should leave on the same day, before the wedding celebration finishes, according to Buryat patrilocal kinship norms) made their presence in *khari nutag* [foreign land] fall below the radar of the contingent forces, which could affect travellers.⁶ Similarly, according to oral histories, Buryat migrants from Russia during their march through parts of Mongolia at the beginning of the last century also tried to be less recognisable and inaudible and decelerated their movement by hiding in forests during daytime and moving only at night, with the hooves of their cattle wrapped in felt and the jaws of their dogs and cattle bound, to stop them making a noise. So as not to exhaust local resources, migrants on the move tried to arrange their travel in small groups following each other at intervals, headed by rangers (*turuchuul*) who, well in advance, had agreed with the locals at which under-populated pastures to stop to feed cattle and what roads to take to pass securely through

6 See L. Legrain (this issue) for a description of how people loudly shout at *nutagiin oboo* to indicate their arrival before the *ezed*.



FIGURE 1 Welcoming bride escort at the border of Aga *nutag*. Guests invited to take seats and offered refreshments. Aginsk, November 2008

PHOTOGRAPH © NINA TSYBENOVA

the *nutag* of their temporal hosts (Namsaraeva 2012). Moreover, experience in travels across Inner Asia—religious pilgrimage to Mongolia and Tibet and caravan trade travel to the Chinese *maimaichengs* [market-places] and trade settlements across Mongolia—allowed travellers to combine different mobility modes tactically (acceleration at certain passes and deceleration at other places) depending on knowledge provided by the local hosts about how to navigate strange territory, involving different speeds and delays. For example, Bataa, a pilgrim, recalled how local hosts in Amdo made their living by helping travellers to navigate their way around dangers on the route to Lhasa, such as encounters with a snow yeti (*almas*) on the mountain passes and attacks by fierce Tibetan dogs. Obviously, strictly following the guidance of the hosts on how to cross the dangerous places and spaces in their *nutag* preserved the lives of the travellers and enabled them to reach their destination, Lhasa, which as a powerful religious site required another travelling rhythm from pilgrims—slow walking and even slower movement with full-length body prostrations on the ground. As Bataa recalled:

We unhurriedly (*aalikhan*) started our pacing from Aga and finally at reaching remote land of Tibet, we were excited to see on horizon by our eyes shining golden *ganjar*⁷ of Potala—residence of Dalai lama. We were so exhausted, and with the last strength we stood to watch Lhasa. Joy and happiness broke free from my deep inside. The rest of the path to the walls of Lhasa, we measured it by full body prostrations (*hunaja murgekhe*).⁸ [On a way to Tibet] I wore into holes 20 pairs of soles on my *guta*⁹ and I reached Lhasa barefooted. My feet were bleeding and festered. A Buryat lama from Tsugol datsan¹⁰ treated me, he put warm yellow batter on my wounds. Slowly it recovered.

NAMSARAIN [1994] 2012: 62

Further examples supporting these arguments around the tactics of slowing down upon arrival at *nutag* border crossings arise from similar cases in present-day Mongolia. I was told a story about a popular Mongolian singer Boldiin Jabkhlán and his election campaign in 2016 to become an MP for the Mongolian *Ikh Khural* [State Parliament]. He won people's sympathy in Darkhan-Uul constituency by his slow manner of moving around four *sums* of the constituency to meet his electorate there. Unlike other candidates, who arrived fast and after meetings with locals left quickly in their corteges of expensive black Japanese jeeps, Jabkhlán would arrive riding a horse in a more respectful manner to the rhythms of small *sums*, fully experiencing the localities and unhurriedly socialising with the locals. Mongolian news coverage helped Jabkhlán's slow-motion election campaign go viral, and people across the country admired his different level of social engagement with people; sympathising with Jabkhlán as a person who was in synch with ordinary people, they entrusted him with their votes. Moreover, in Mongolia's traditional literature, movement is founded upon travel by horse, and defined by the pleasures and difficulties which that entails. For example, the nineteenth-century monk-poet Danzanravjaa would travel on horseback as a metaphor for the

7 *Ganjar* is an architectural decoration in forms of balls at the roofs of lamaseries.

8 See Humphrey (this issue) for the detailed description of the full body prostrations at the slowest end of the mobility spectrum.

9 Mongolian *guta* [knee-high boots] have a thick outsole made of layers of textile and leather, which can be removed and replaced by a new one. Interestingly, in pilgrims' tales spatial distance was calculated by the number of outsoles a traveller had to change on his *guta* during his/her travel. In his travelogue, Bataa mentioned that he prepared 20 pairs of outsoles to walk the distance to Tibet (Namsarain [1994] 2012).

10 Tsugol datsan is a large lamasery in Aginsk district founded in 1801. It had close ties with the lamaseries of Amdo, in particular Labrang, though lamas of the Tsugol datsan had been trained widely in other monastic communities of Tibet.

long journey to enlightenment (Wickham-Smith 2015). Similarly, Buryat prisoners in Stalinist labour camps would hire a horse to give a final ride to a deceased person as a metaphor for his/her respectful journey to Erlik khan, God of Death, according to oral histories of Buryat deportees to the Krasnoyarsky *krai* of western Siberia.¹¹

Another story of prompted deceleration tells how the locals constrained guests to slow down and to change their fast movement in order to experience fully the intense emotions of the local community. When the first Mongolian President P. Ochirbaat (1993–97), elected by direct popular vote, started his first official tour of the country, he had a difficult task meeting people face-to-face in small *sums*' communities, where he had to talk not only about the country's worsening economic situation, but also about the importance of the political rehabilitation campaign he had started and how to come to terms with the country's contradictory past and the mass purges of the *Ikh Khelmegdiülelt* [great repressions] period. Each *nutag* had to prepare for these meetings and compile a list of the local people who had been persecuted, so their families could claim monetary compensation from the government. Due to the heavy human losses experienced by the Buryat communities of the Khentei and Dornod *aimags* during the Stalinist purges, they were strongly anticipating meeting the President, hoping to hear from him a sort of confession of guilt for the excessive cruelty the Mongolian State had imposed on migrant Buryat communities during that period. The administration of the Dashbalbar sum in Dornod *aimag*, while preparing for the arrival of the honoured guest, asked one of the elders of the community to meet the President at the *oboo*, which marked the border of the *sum*. Old Bodonguud Danzan—a survivor of political persecution himself—rode his horse to the *oboo* to meet the head of the Mongolian state. While waiting for the guests, Danzan boiled fresh rich tea on a small fire, and when the presidential cortege of police cars reinforced jeeps packed with security personnel and *aimag* leaders stopped at the *oboo*, Danzan greeted the President with a ceremonial *khadak* according to the rules of Mongolian hospitality; and as a welcome offered Ochirbaat a seat next to the fireplace and a bowl full of hot tea. To have tea together in the open air also indicated the start of a polite conversation with a guest, something Danzan did without hesitation. Here, to illustrate how tea-drinking and an open-air conversation session transform deceleration (voluntarily or involuntarily) of arrival

11 Oral communication with Pavel Ayurzanaev (Aginsk, July 2019).



FIGURE 2 Conversation in the open air (*Agaarei agalagta huunad*) by Tsyren-Namjil Ochirov, 1980

into the establishment of social relations, I refer to a picture *Conversation in the open air* (1980) by a Buryat naïve artist, Tsyren-Namjil Ochirov¹² (Figure 2).

After having tea, to the great surprise of the officials, Danzan politely declined the invitation to take a seat in the president's car (which meant becoming a guest after being a host) to drive to the *sum* centre. Old Danzan mounted his horse to lead the guests to his *nutag*. To obey the rules of hospitality, the presidential cortege had to decelerate their usual driving speed and slowed down their vehicles to the pace of Danzan's slow horse to be guided to Dashbalbar. The story of Danzan and how he 'captured' the Mongolian President became very popular among locals, and Danzan later used to joke that capturing the Mongolian President for a little while was actually a small recompense for his 15 years of being sentenced to Mongolian prisons and Stalinist labour camps. As far as I understood when I was told this story in Dashbalbar, slowing down the President's arrival achieved his hosts' aims. Ochirbaat indeed stayed in

12 Tsyren-Namjil Ochirov (1920–1987) lived in a small *nutag* in Kudun of Kizhinga district in Soviet Buryatia. He commented on this picture as follows: 'It is enjoyable to have tea in some distance from home. Privacy of conversation preserved. It is the way it used to be in Kudun before 1926' (Tarnueva 2019). In other words, the artist contrasts the social time of the past with changes in their life after 1926 at the time of socialist modernisation.

Dahbalbar longer (including an overnight stay due to unexpected delays) than in other *sums*, and people at a meeting which lasted till late in the night were able to express the pain of mistreatment and years of humiliation and finally be fully heard by the State, as embodied by Ochirbaat himself. In part this tactic ‘to capture’ the president met the needs of Buryat community to rebuild their social ties with the Mongolian state and to reach a new collective ‘synchronicity’ with it.

Often, Westerners visiting Mongolia feel confused about sudden disruptions in their activities when everything for whatever reason is slowed down and postponed till *margash* [tomorrow]. As a cultural tip, the recent Lonely Planet edition on Mongolia even put a special remark for travellers about another form of ‘Mongolian time’, which suggests some stretched and prolonged schedule delays.¹³ Other critical comments generalise *margash* as a cultural phenomenon specific to Mongolian society known as *margashism* and describe it as ‘passivity and delaying actions’ (Orsoo Tuya 2015: 3), ‘irresponsibility’ and ‘torpor’ (Black *et al.* 2015), or even a sign that activity is ‘never [going] to happen’ (Ilishkin 2017). However, in the light of the more nuanced understanding of slowness and tactical deceleration in Mongolian (and probably more broadly in an Inner Asian) context, a colloquial remark ‘*margash*’ perhaps should be perceived as an invitation to slow down, get rid of speed-based logic and as a suggestion to attune to the local rhythms and invest more in social relations.

3 In Dysrhythmia with *nutag*

Before I turn to another ethnographic case, it is worth outlining some key moments in reestablishing relations with alienated *nutag*—an old homeland, which had been abandoned for various reasons.¹⁴ Regular seasonal movements between different seasonal encampments can be viewed as passage from one kind of space to another, each time requiring an engagement in relations with

13 As Lonely Planet writes, ‘There is another form of “Mongolian time”: add an hour to any appointments you make. Mongolians are notorious for being late, although this is more a problem in the countryside than in the city. Often events and meetings are simply put off until the next day. The Mongolian version of *mañana* (tomorrow) is *margash*’ (Holden & Karlin 2018).

14 In general, the orbital trajectory could be widened and narrowed depending on environmental conditions (drought, plague, etc.) and other circumstances, such as war, land disputes between pasture claimants, or when the expanded clan divided into several lineages. People searching for new pastures (or a more peaceful place) could move to another orbit, where a foreign landscape could again be ‘domesticated’ and transformed into a new homeland using these rituals.

the spiritual powers of the locality upon arrival at summer or winter pastures, because after people leave a place (for a year or even much longer—up to several centuries, as will be described later in the case of Barga Mongols coming to visit their historical homeland in Barguzin valley in Buryatia), it becomes to a certain extent ‘alienated’ (Humphrey & Onon 1996; Sodnompilova 2005). Mongolian studies contain rich ethnographic descriptions of rituals enacted at the moments of departure and arrival at a new place, marking a ‘chosen’ place as already reserved (*geriin or onavakh*) before departure. These include rituals of worship and symbolic ‘payment’ on arrival to local *ezen/ezed*¹⁵ for the right to use their territory for a period: rituals of ‘feeding’ the master of the fireplace in the newly erected *ger*, and emphasis on highly ritualistic practices accompanying arrivals and departures (e.g. Basaeva 1993; Tserenkhand 1993). In other words, people should remind the spirits about themselves and renew their ties with this segment of their homeland by holding certain ‘homecoming’ rituals. Elsewhere I have tried to describe the fluidity of the concept of *nutag* and interplay between practices of alienation from it (*khari nutag*) and bonding with it (*nutaglakha*) upon return, using the ethnography of Buryat migration to Inner Mongolia and Mongolia (Namsaraeva 2012). Following this line further, the second case shows the complications of reconnecting with a *nutag* which was left several centuries earlier, and how guests with their short visits provoked tensions and imbalance in the triangulated arrangement of relations between *ezed*, human hosts and guests, as some locals believed.

Transborder mobility of the Barga Mongols and their historical homeland visits¹⁶ to their former *nutag* in Barguzin valley, known historically as Bargajin Tokum, is a comparatively new social phenomenon, which started only five or six years ago. Barga Mongols from Mongolia were the first to initiate this kind of ‘nostalgic tourism’, when a number of Barga cultural activists came to Kurumkan village in Barguzin to worship Barakhan uuliin mountain *ezen* at Gulmakta *oboo* and to re-connect with the spirits of their ancestral homeland. According to Tsogt Adya, a Barga cultural activist from Mongolia,¹⁷ during their first visit to Kurumkan in the summer of 2014 Barga Mongols erected a special

15 Plural *ezed*.

16 Barga Mongol legends are full of longing for their lost *nutag*, when they still call the Lake Baikal ‘Our kingly Father’ and Barguzin valley ‘Our kingly mother’. In their daily practices, Barga Mongols place a horse saddle and a bow in the direction of the north to remind themselves where their original homeland is, to return there one day (Vanchikova & Miyagasheva 2017).

17 Tsogt Adya pers. comm., November 2014.

*Bargiin serge*¹⁸ at the foot of the *Barakhan uul* mountain near Gulmakta *oboo* to worship and to re-introduce themselves to a powerful master of the mountain, *Khazar Sagan Noyon* [Khazar White Lord]—one of the 13 supreme *ezed* of the North (13 *Ariin noed*) in the Mongolian shamanic pantheon¹⁹ (Khangelov [1903] 1958).

It is important to explain that for the Barga Mongols (who also see themselves as a transborder ethnic group divided between Mongolia and China) it was an inspiring example when Mongolian Buryats established transborder reconnection activities with their kin majority in Russia almost 20 years ago. In 1994 the Buryats of Dadal *sum* initiated a transborder Buryat folklore festival, Altargana, which now takes place every two years rotating between Mongolia and Russia. Following the Buryats, the Barga of Mongolia, also established their own transborder Barga ethnocultural international festival (*olon ulsiin naadam*) 'Bargajin naadam' in 2007. In his interview, the head of the Mongolian Barga Association Jambachoimbol Lkhamjabin Gombo (Gombo) even referred to Bargajin Naadam as '*Altarganiin dүү*'²⁰ (younger sibling of Altargana), thus recognising the pioneering role of the Buryats in reconnecting Mongol-speaking parts of China and Russia with Mongolia after the 1990s. Like the Buryat Altargana, Bargajin Naadam also rotates, taking place every three years in *sums* of Dornod *aimag* where there is a considerable Barga population. Strangely enough, China has never been a host for the Altargana, or for the Bargajin Naadam, though Shenekhen Buryats and Inner Mongolian Old and New Barga Mongols actively participate in these festivals at various locations in Mongolia and Russia, but still are not able to host these transborder festivals in Inner Mongolian Hulun Buir.

In 2015 it was the turn of the Kurumkan district (*Khuramkhan*) in Russia to host the 3rd Bargajin Naadam—for the first time in a foreign cross-border

18 A ceremonial horse-tethering pole to indicate a place in the landscape where human hosts worship *ezed* of their *nutag* and their ancestors.

19 Interestingly, Buryat shamans believe that these 13 *Ariin noed* extend their power across eastern Siberia and northern Mongolia (*Ara Mongol*) from the Yenisei river in the west up to the Amur river in the east (Tsydenov 2011). Moreover, the imagined 'super-mobility' of the *ezed* allowed them to travel within their cosmic territory and be co-present at many places at once. Here, as Humphrey points out, 'The practice of veneration of the Master of the Land embodied a contradiction' (and the 'opposite scenario', when people worshipping at *oboo* act as the hosts, who invite the 'Master' to come to the *oboo* as their guest to partake and to persuade him to give spiritual, blessing, good fortune and protection from enemies (Humphrey 2019: 183–4).

20 Interview with Zhambachoimbol Lkhamzhabiin Gombo at Buryat Television. <https://bgtkr.ru/national/tv/buryaad-oron/122533/> (accessed 13 July 2019).

location.²¹ The logical question is, why the Buryats of the Barguzin valley decided to join the Barga Mongols transborder movement in addition to the Buryat Altargana transborder cultural event, in which they are already actively involved. Perhaps the answer lies in the distinctive territorial divisions among Buryats, when along with the unifying trend of all-Buryat unity of the 1990s, some new local trends appeared in the 2000s with local identity elements based both on clan and territorial divisions to emphasise the uniqueness and legendary past of each territorial group (Elaeva 2005). In this territorial division between large groups of Khori Buryats, Bulagats, Ekhirid and Khongodor Buryats, smaller groups, such as the Barguzin Buryats, had to find their niche as ‘custodians’ of the mythical cradle land for all Mongols—the legendary BargajinTokum nowadays narrowly attributed to Barguzin valley—allegedly the *nutag* of powerful ancestors for Buryats and Barga Mongols such as *Barguudai baavai*, for a mythical ancestress of Chinggis Khan Alangoa, and for Chinggis Khan’s mother Oelun (Nanzatov & Sodnompoliva 2016). Therefore, to stress their uniqueness and historical unity with Barga Mongols, the Buryats of Barguzin valley even started calling themselves ‘Barga Buryats’—a comparatively new self-designation—mostly used previously only by the Barga Mongols themselves (Vanchikova & Miyagasheva 2017).

It was the turn of the Barguzin Buryats to host the 3rd Bargajin Naadam between 18th and 20th July 2015 in their *nutag* in a small, remote village, Kurumkan, squeezed between the Ikat and Barguzin mountain ranges in the far northern corner of the Barguzin valley. A small *nutag* of around 5000 people, where Buryats are still in the majority, was preparing for the arrival of the guests, who had to travel more than 2000 kilometres from remote Barga *sums* in eastern Mongolia and three Barga *khoshuuns* in Inner Mongolia (see map, Figure 3).

What could go wrong? As Gombo, one of the Mongolian Barga activists, recalled in his interview: ‘My spirit was flying high anticipating the Barga Naadam opening. I was happy to see so many Barga Mongols arriving!’²² But very soon the organisers realised that the number of guests arriving exceeded

21 The chronology of the most important events is as follows. 2007: 1st Bargajin Naadam in Hulunbuir *sum* of Dornod *aimag*; 2011: 2nd Bargajin Nadaam, also in Dornod (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBsS-XDeO-Y>). 2015: 3rd Bargajin Naadam took place in Buryatia in Kyrumkan district. Small groups of delegates from Barguzin and Kurumkan districts also participated in the 1st and 2nd Bargajin Naadam activities.

22 Buryat language Buryat Republic TV broadcast *Buryaad Oron*. <https://bgtrk.ru/national/tv/buryaad-oron/122533/>.



FIGURE 3
Geography of the Barga Mongols

their expectations by three to four times, and guests continued arriving.²³ This sudden high attendance of Barga Mongols coming from Mongolia and China was stimulated by new political circumstances and changing border-crossing regulations between Russia, China and Mongolia. Six months earlier, in November 2014, Russia and Mongolia introduced visa-free facilities for their citizens to allow them to travel freely to a neighbouring country for up to 30 days; also Chinese citizens were allowed to have short trips to Russia in tourist groups of 5–15 persons.

Neither the hosts nor the organisers of the event were aware of how many guests had already arrived. The Bargajin Naadam festival was facing logistical chaos, disrupting local life and generating unexpected situations beyond the hosts' and guests' control. All accommodation facilities—the sport halls of the local schools, and two guest-houses—had already been reserved for registered guests, and the unexpected guests, whose arrival was delayed by their bus breaking down on the bumpy, more than 400-kilometre drive from Ulan-Ude, could not find anywhere to stay in the village. By the end of the first day, food supplies in the local restaurants, canteens and food stores had been exhausted. Local ATMs ran out of cash, and foreign guests could not use their credit cards to get cash in Russian roubles to pay for services they needed. In addition, the buses and cars exhausted gasoline supplies at fuel stations so that some guests could not start their return journey and had to prolong their stay for an extra

23 As a local newspaper reported, 'Registration of arriving guests was not well organised. As fragmentary report shows, around 500 guests arrived—more than half of them were from China' (extracted from <http://gazetarb.ru/news/section-society/detail-41128/>). The webpage no longer exists. However, it was re-posted at <https://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?xid=3707683> (accessed 27 August 2019).

day. Prices for gasoline rocketed in the hands of middlemen, and local shopkeepers were also unable to arrange the delivery of additional provisions from Ulan-Ude. Not only daily but seasonal routine rhythmic cycles had been temporarily disrupted. Due to the gasoline shortage, locals could not use the sunny summer days to drive deep into forest to cut hay, collect berries and go fishing and hunting. The rhythmical calendar of other social events was also affected. Another All Buryat Republic Countryside Wrestling Festival (Rus. *Sel'skie Igry*) was about to take place in Kurumkan village two days after the *Bargiin naadam*. A new wave of guests started arriving before the Barga guests had left, so that the fragile infrastructure of the local *nutag* simply had no time to recover.

The disruption culminated two days later when the Barga guests finally left. An intense forest fire (*gal tuimer*) approached Barguzin valley, filled Kurumkan village with heavy smoke and almost reached the village edge. That was the turning point when the locals started reflecting on the causal relations between the recent events in their community and environmental disaster, trying to guess why they and their *nutag* were at risk. Interestingly, their reflections posted on social media, local newspapers²⁴ and private conversations²⁵ linked it to the social behaviour of people and—very much in accordance with a ‘traditional’ worldview—with their relation to powerful other-than human beings, *ezed* of the Barguzin valley, in particular the most powerful and fierce *Barakhan uuliin ezen* (or as the locals used to address him, *Barakhan Baabai* [Our Father Barakhan]), and their regulatory role in punishing or rewarding humans. The full range of different opinions and comments, including some conspiracy theories, voiced by the locals can be grouped according to the set of relationships between hosts and guests (1), relations between *ezed* and guests (2), and relations between the locals and *ezed* (3).

3.1 *Relations between Hosts and Guests*

From the point of view of the locals, at the level of human host–guest relations, the guests violated the rules of hospitality and arrived in greater numbers than the hosts were ready to welcome. The guests stayed longer than was expected, exhausting local resources, and their delayed departure affected the arrival of another set of guests. Most surprising was that locals suspected that

24 See online version of a local newspaper *Ogni Kulrumkana* [Lights of Kurumkan] (<http://ognikurumkan.ru>) and Buryat Republic press and local TV programmes around these events.

25 I caught the news about these events later in August 2015, when I had conversations with the owner of a local shop in Kurumkan, who drives between Ulan-Ude and Kurumkan once a week to deliver goods and provision. As a *khuryakhee* to our family, he makes occasional stops at the families of his wife's kin with her messages and requests.

some guests had faked their identities. One such rumour was that among the Barga Mongols were many Chinese spies disguised in Mongolian dress. The locals sensed that many guests spoke the Chinese language among themselves instead of speaking the Mongol language. A Sinophobic conspiracy started circulating that with the Barga cultural event as a pretext, many Chinese arrived secretly to collect intelligence about the natural resources and land in the Barguzin valley so as to acquire it in the future. However, at this point opinions contradicted each other: some people suggested that Barga Mongols are nowadays experiencing great pressure from the Chinese, and they came to Barguzin valley to find whether their old homeland was suitable for them to return to. Some locals even made welcoming and sympathetic comments, such as 'Let Barga come back and live with us, we have enough land for everybody. After all, it was their homeland a long time ago'. Other comments expressed regret that the guests' arrival was so messy, inaccurate and delayed. The schedule of welcoming events with the opening ceremony and welcoming banquet with a concert were all messed up. The hosts did not have time or resources to include all guests within their hospitality, only those who arrived early enough. Understanding that the hosts were unable to fulfil their obligation to treat all guests equally, it was generally regretted, and expressed by a local journalist that the situation had caused confusion between guests and hosts:

What a shame [for us] that some guests left with feelings of being neglected and ignored. What bad memories and impression [about us] they will take back home to share with their families.²⁶

The journalist had voiced an important idea: that the locals had also damaged their own reputation as hosts, that probably Barga Mongols would think that their historical homeland in Barguzin was not in suitable hands, and had destabilised the position of the locals as human hosts. In other comments the locals tried to accuse the organiser, Gombo from Mongolia, of misusing the Barga nostalgic homecoming for his own commercial interests and for not sharing with the local administration the financial resources fund raised by the Barga Mongols to organise their festival in a proper way. An article entitled 'Businessman doesn't have homeland' (Russ. *Kommersant ne imeet otechestva*)²⁷ generated much discussion and many online comments, even accusing Gombo of failure not only to organise the event properly, but also of miscommunication with the local administration and neglecting the unspoken rules

26 <https://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?xid=3707683>.

27 <https://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?xid=3707683>.

of the local community on how to behave at their local sacred sites. The most shameful, as the locals believed, was the improper behaviour of the guests near Barakhan uul and pollution of the Gulmakta *oboo* there. Therefore, according to this logic, the guests confused not only the locals, but also the *ezed* of their *nutag*, with the result that tensions between the guests and hosts at human level (what Derrida (2000) called *hostipitality*) accelerated to a higher level—to the cosmic level of *ezed*.

3.2 Relations between Guests and *ezed*

So, what had gone wrong at the level of the guests and *ezed* relations—between the Barga guests and the powerful spirits of Barakhan uul? According to my informant our *khuryakhe* from Kurumkan, the locals did not like the fact that guests firstly ignored a rule about being blessed by the lamas in Kurumkan *datsan* before setting off up the holy mountain, though the *datsan* stood just at the beginning of the pathway. Actually, this opinion corresponds to the Buddhist explanations, that mountain deities have been tamed by the supremacy of Buddhism and subordinated to guard Buddhism and its followers (Diemberger 1998). Secondly, instead of respectfully slowly walking up to the places of worship, guests drove their buses and cars up to the *oboo*. Thirdly, guests literally polluted worshipping sites by building a temporary camp with tents and digging holes in the earth for toilets in close proximity to the *oboo* for the comfort of the several hundred participants in the collective worship, rather than using public toilets near the *datsan*, where visitors were expected to ‘clean’ themselves before going up to a holy mountain. The strongest criticism from the point of view of the locals (and probably an attempt to delegitimise all Barga efforts to reconnect with the old homeland) was a remark, which expressed a doubt: ‘Was the Barga *serge* erected correctly and at the right place at all?’ In addition to its spiritual importance, Gulmakta *oboo* also has the special status of an archaeological conservation and cultural heritage site under state protection, and any activities there, such as erecting a *serge*, required special permission from the local conservation authorities. A local journalist asked a rhetorical question: ‘Who gave them [the guests] such permission [to erect the Barga *serge*]?’²⁸ implying that additional permission from the state conservation agency was equally important to the heavenly one issued by *ezed*. The locals also recalled the fact that guests invited none of local shamans or lamas to join the Barga worship at Gulmakta *oboo*, which actually confirmed their suspicion that erecting the Barga *serge* was not simply a useless and illegitimate

28 <https://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?xid=3707683>.

action, but rather a damaging act, which could bring the curse of *ezed* and misfortune to the people.

Not only the place of worship, but also the time of worship was criticised. It is well known locally that the collective shamanic ritual *Barakha takhilga* usually takes place annually at the beginning of June, 'when a cuckoo bird starts calling' (*kǔkhiin dongodokho üede*), and presumably the Barga guests knew about the correct date for the worship from previous visits. However, the guests deliberately decided to have their own ceremony later in June without mixing with the locals. The Barga Mongols brought their own shamans from the Old Barga community to conduct their ceremony without the participation of the local Buryat shamans or *khadachi* —the local 'elders of the mountains'.²⁹ With such criticism, the locals wanted to accuse the guests of attempting to act independently from the locals and ignoring their rules and their assistance in navigating guests through the sacred landscape of the Barakhan uul. In other words, the guests attempted to challenge the position of the locals as custodians of the *nutag*.

3.3 Relations between the Locals and *ezed*

The wrath of *ezed* was revealed very soon. The locals believed that the curse of this chaos in social relations resulted in the form of a catastrophic forest fire (*tuimer*), which was more damaging than ever experienced before in the sparsely populated mountainous Kurumkan. Indeed, the summer of 2015 in eastern Siberia in was very hot and dry, and news about occasional fire spots here and there appeared regularly in press. Nevertheless the locals in Kurumkan believed that it was a curse and punishment sent by angry *ezed*. In the scope of the relations between locals and *ezed*, the opinions of the locals still varied around the question 'Who are the true custodians of the Barguzin valley? The locals? Or the Barga guests?' As one comment says:

The Old Barguuts are shamanists. And some people said that they [guests] felt offended. But guests didn't show it, they behaved with dignity and self-respect. They left with no complaints (Russ. *molcha*). But what a disaster occurred afterwards!³⁰

29 *khadachi* is a special category of prayers among local elders who have authority to worship mountain deities without shamans (Gomboev 2004).

30 Quoted from <http://gazetarb.ru/news/section-society/detail-411128/> (the web-page no longer exists). It was re-posted at <https://forum.ykt.ru/viewtopic.jsp?xid=3707683> (accessed 27 August 2019).

Interestingly, this comment suggests a contrary opinion, that Barga worshipping at the Gulmakta *oboo* achieved its aims, and Barga Mongols indeed succeeded in reconnection with the powerful *ezed*. The *ezed* responded to the Barga's worship and requests for protection. And finally the Barga re-connection with the old homeland and its *ezed* took place. This view also suggests that the guests were able to channel their anger with the locals by using the protection and power of *ezed* to destabilise the position of the locals as custodians of *nutag*; that *ezed* protection over the Barga against 'offenders' might bring a heavy curse and result in the expulsion of the locals from their *nutag* in favour of new/old custodians, who arrived to claim their former *nutag*. Therefore, it also can be suggested that, notwithstanding who the guests were, *ezed* became angry with the locals for their inability to control strangers at their *nutag*, that the locals failed to guide the guests about how to worship and to treat the local *ezed* at the proper time and at proper places. It probably also suggests that the locals should restrain guests so that their visitation agenda should not dominate local life, despite the rules of hospitality. Therefore, a stable hierarchy of social interactions between the locals and *ezed* at *nutag* should not be challenged any more by the incoming rhythms of the strangers, and their claims, whatever they might be.

4 Conclusion

Subjective reflections of the locals about the contradictory outcomes of the Barga Mongols' homecoming related here present an entirely 'internal' community discourse, and were carried on in the privacy of the Kurumkan Buryat community. They show that, along with the diverse responses, there was a prevailing point of view, that the Barga homecoming brought unexpected results—attempts to reconnect with the ancestral *nutag* resulted in the disconnection and social exclusion of the guests. The guests' performance was perceived as an attempt to challenge the position of the locals as human hosts, which finally resulted in power confusion and social chaos. Immediately, *nutag* was put into a crisis of arrhythmia. It also could be explained that the disorientating experiences of confusion between the guests and the locals was finally regulated by *ezed*, who, as other-than-humans, sent powerful messages—too dangerous to ignore—to humans to regulate and harmonise their social relations. In addition, to my mind, this experience of arrhythmia also opened this small *nutag* to different new rhythms through temporal clashing and harmonising the multiplicity of growing flows of new people coming and going with the local rhythms.

Based on Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, I have tried to share some initial thoughts about the multiple temporalities of a Mongolian *nutag*, and why entering the spiritually thick atmosphere of *nutag* (at crossing its borders) requires a certain slowing down and tactical deceleration to allow time to adjust to local rhythms best understood and sensed by the locals. Introducing a triangulated arrangement of relations between *ezed* masters, guests and the locals in the social landscape of *nutag* allows us to examine the hierarchy of the various contingent forces that influence people at their own or at *khari nutag* [foreign land]. To borrow an expression from physics to add to the analytical vocabulary of writing on slowness and deceleration, each *nutag* appears to be a sort of a 'viscous medium' with different rhythms and fluids creating more drag on objects moving through it.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Caroline Humphrey, Joseph Bristley and anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback and comments. I also thank Graham de Smidt, who helped edit the article, and acknowledge the generous support from the European Regional Development Fund, Project 'Sinophone Borderlands—Interaction at the Edges' (CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791).

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