

"How can we refuse the gift of spirits?" Ontological conflicts between indigenous hunting practices and conservation projects in northern Mongolia

Selcen Küçüküstel ¹

University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE), Portugal

Abstract

Conflicts between indigenous people and state authorities over conservation projects are increasing in many parts of the world, as traditional indigenous territories mostly coincide with areas that hold 80% of the world's biodiversity. Although both indigenous people and conservationists think of themselves as the "protectors" of those territories, disagreements about how to protect those lands seem inevitable. When the issue concerns hunting bans, it becomes even more polarized. From a scientific perspective, hunting is seen simply as an activity of killing animals and causing more extinction, while indigenous people may view it in various other ways: as a rite of regeneration of animals or as communicating with spirits. Thus, the main reason for the conflict is their different understanding of nature and animals and how to interact with them; in other words, it is rooted in ontological disputes. To investigate this further, this article analyses the Dukha community in northern Mongolia. The Dukha are reindeer herders/hunters whose territory was declared a national park, banning hunting. This article demonstrates how the life cycle and social relations of Indigenous communities can be disturbed by the establishment of protected areas.

Keywords: Indigenous people, protected areas, conservation, ontological turn, hunting, Dukha reindeer herders

Résumé

Les conflits entre les populations autochtones et les autorités étatiques concernant les projets de conservation se multiplient dans le monde entier, car les territoires autochtones traditionnels coïncident avec des zones qui abritent 80 % de la biodiversité mondiale. Bien que les populations autochtones et les défenseurs de l'environnement se considèrent comme les « protecteurs » de ces territoires, les désaccords sur la manière de les protéger semblent inévitables. L'interdiction de la chasse suscite des opinions très divergentes. D'un point de vue scientifique, la chasse est considérée comme un moyen de tuer les animaux et d'aggraver leur extinction, tandis que les populations indigènes peuvent la considérer d'une autre manière: comme un rite de régénération des animaux ou comme un moyen de communiquer avec les esprits. Les conflits émergent en raison de conceptions différentes de la nature et des animaux, et de la manière d'interagir avec eux; en d'autres termes, ils sont enracinés dans des différends ontologiques. Pour étudier cette question, l'article analyse la communauté Dukha dans le nord de la Mongolie. Les Dukha sont des éleveurs de rennes/chasseurs dont le territoire a été déclaré parc national, interdisant la chasse. Cet article montre comment le cycle de vie et les relations sociales des communautés indigènes peuvent être perturbés par la création de zones protégées.

Mots-clés: Peuples autochtones, zones protégées, conservation, tournant ontologique, chasse, éleveurs de rennes Dukha

¹ Dr [Selcen Küçüküstel](mailto:selcenustel@gmail.com), Postdoc, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal. Email: selcenustel@gmail.com. I am deeply indebted to all my interlocutors in the Dukha community in northern Mongolia for their kindness and inspiring guidance. This research was possible thanks to their support. I would also like to thank the reviewers and the editorial team of the Journal of Political Ecology who have generously helped me to improve my arguments. This article is part of my project that has received funding from the European Union Marie Skłodowska Curie Postdoctoral Fellowships (MSCA-PF) (proposal ID 101107342).

Resumen

Los conflictos entre los pueblos Indígenas y las autoridades estatales por proyectos de conservación están aumentando en muchas partes del mundo, ya que los territorios indígenas tradicionales suelen coincidir con áreas que albergan el 80% de la biodiversidad mundial. Aunque tanto los pueblos Indígenas como los conservacionistas se consideran a sí mismos como los "protectores" de esos territorios, los desacuerdos sobre cómo proteger esas tierras parecen inevitables. Cuando el tema concierne a la prohibición de la caza, la tensión se polariza aún más. Desde una perspectiva científica, la caza se percibe simplemente como una actividad de matar animales y causar más extinción, mientras que los pueblos indígenas pueden verla de diversas maneras: como un rito de regeneración de animales o como una forma de comunicación con los espíritus. Por lo tanto, la razón principal del conflicto proviene de su diferente comprensión de la naturaleza y los animales y de cómo interactuar con ellos; en otras palabras, está enraizada en conflictos ontológicos. Para investigar esto más a fondo, este artículo analiza a la comunidad Dukha en el norte de Mongolia. Los Dukha son pastores/cazadores de renos cuyo territorio fue declarado parque nacional, prohibiendo la caza. Este artículo demuestra cómo el ciclo de vida y las relaciones sociales de las comunidades indígenas pueden verse perturbados por el establecimiento de áreas protegidas.

Palabras clave: pueblos indígenas, áreas protegidas, conservación, giro ontológico, caza, pastores de renos Dukha

1. Introduction

They tell us to stop hunting and give us money to buy meat. Last year I saw the same dream so many times, a woman coming to me and telling me to follow her. It is the land spirit offering me animals. How can we refuse the gift of the spirits? They will be so offended! (Batbayar 2016, Mongolia)

The words above reflect the sentiments of a young Indigenous Dukha hunter from the northern Mongolian taiga (boreal forest), who shared his struggles with the hunting ban imposed after their homeland was designated as a national park. It was on a cold winter day and we were sitting by the fire in a tent in the taiga, discussing how five young men were almost sent to prison last year when they were caught hunting. The Dukha were still not able to fully grasp the reasoning behind it. What is considered "conservation" for the Mongolian state authorities was the opposite for them, as these Indigenous hunters were all worried about offending the spirits, which would be destructive in the long term. The idea that outsiders have come to their remote forests to "protect" their home from "them" was completely perplexing for the Indigenous community members.

The Dukha are a small group of nomadic reindeer herders and hunters who live in northern Mongolia in the north-western section of Hovsgol Province, a remote area characterized by its forests, rivers, lakes, and abundant wildlife (Pedersen, 2009, Figure 1, 2). They are the only reindeer herders in Mongolia, with a population of nearly 500, and represent one of the southernmost communities of reindeer herders in the world (Donahoe, 2004). Their subsistence livelihood is traditionally based on hunting wild game and breeding small numbers of reindeer for transportation and milk, usually known as the Sayan type of reindeer herding (Vainstein, 1980). Although the Dukha are well known as reindeer herders in Mongolia, in reality, they rely on hunting more than the reindeer for their livelihood. As Ingold states, "they are principally hunters and gatherers who keep domestic reindeer for milking, riding, and pack transport" (Ingold, 1986, p. 6).

Although the Dukha have been through many changes in the last century, such as adapting to socialism in Mongolia in the early 1920s, and then to the market economy again after 1990, they continued to rely heavily on hunting in the taiga. They mostly hunt for subsistence, although some also worked as "state hunters" during the socialist period, providing meat for the state (Küçüküstel 2021). When their territory was declared the Tengis-Shishged National Park in 2011, hunting was suddenly banned in the area and their migration routes were also strictly controlled by state authorities. This national park was established by the Ministry of Environment and Tourism and covers an area of 869,070 hectares (2.15 million acres), which involves all the

migratory routes of the Dukha. The result is that official park ranchers patrolled them, and even placed camera traps around the taiga, since hunting, fishing, and chopping wood were banned and only limited human movement was allowed. This meant that every time Dukha migrated with their reindeer, they needed to inform the authorities. During the establishment of the park and the enforcement of regulations, neither park authorities, nor the government, contacted or consulted with the Dukha. Officials arrived one day, told them about the situation, and left. Therefore, it was not only the hunting ban but also a feeling of being ignored and restrained, which made people feel like they had lost their freedom in their beloved taiga (Figure 3). The authorities were always suspicious of their movements, patrolling them constantly, since retaining autonomy over their own land is vital for Dukha families. They felt powerless and lacked self-confidence in their community, like many other nomads in different parts of the world (Galaty & Johnson 1990). As a young Dukha hunter put it while talking about the hunting ban: "Feeding ourselves is important but more importantly if hunting is allowed, we get back our freedom. Right now, we feel like we are living in a prison on our own land" (Batbataar, 2016).



Figure 1: The territory where the Dukha have been living has been part of the Tengis-Shishged National Park since 2011. According to them, this geography is full of master spirits that control the animals and people living in it. Mongolia, 2012, photo by the author

2. Protecting the environment from humans. Ontological conflicts

The shock that the Dukha community members felt is not an isolated case. Similar conflicts over conservation with adverse outcomes for Indigenous people have been widely documented (Kemf, 1993; Langton, 2003; Adams & Hutton, 2007; Chapin, 2004; Bocarejo & Ojeda, 2016). The history of national parks also illustrates an anthropocentric and ethnocentric belief that wild areas are (or should be) empty and intact, ignoring histories and disregarding the people that have lived there for centuries (Mace, 2014). This usually causes harm to Indigenous communities, as they experience a loss of lands, autonomy, and resources, as well as the rupture of cultural and spiritual links as a consequence of their separation from these areas (Tauli-Corpuz, 2016). As Paul Robbins (2011) states, in most cases, conservation reflects a form of hegemonic governmentality, as the control of resources and landscapes is taken away from local groups through the excuse

of preserving the "environment", disabling local livelihood systems (Robbins 2011, pp.178). West (2006) also described how conservation projects were perceived as "development" in a remote part of Papua New Guinea where the local population was isolated from their government and lacked the power to manage their own development processes. After some time, it was clear that the Western understanding of conservation, which saw nature as a commodity, was very different from the Gimi's, and clashes between the two became inevitable.



Figure 2: Winters last for many months in the taiga and temperatures may drop below minus 40 C on average at night. Reindeer are important partners to survive in this harsh geography. Mongolia, 2013, Photo by the author

We see that the interpretation of "protected areas or national parks" is indirectly connected with the distinction or separation of humankind from nature (DeMello, 2012; Fletcher, 2009). According to this divide, animals belong in nature, while humans are an exception, as the "essence of their humanity transcends nature" (Ingold, 1994, p. 4). Along similar lines, for nature to be considered "pure," it has to be distant from human touch since humans are not a part of the natural world, and the two cannot be merged (Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, conservation projects with the "no-human touch" approach bear some resemblance to greenwashing projects, acting with strict dualities and perceiving nature in terms of numeric calculations of value, such as valuation of biodiversity through the number of animals present in an area. Conservation scientists can disregard the power of nature, ignoring its unpredictable quality while making decisions and controlling the management of protected areas and parks (Sullivan, 2017).

Other researchers also mention this tendency to strictly control the environment in conservation projects. Tsing (2015) critiques traditional conservation efforts that aim to restore ecosystems to a pristine, untouched state, arguing that some ecosystems, such as those supporting the Matsutake mushroom, flourish in disturbed environments. She stresses the importance of moving away from rigid conservation models and embracing the potential for harmony between human activities and nature by accepting the unpredictable and contingent nature of our world. Ingold (1994) also explains how scientific conservation sees humans as controllers of the natural

world, bearing full responsibility for the survival or extinction of wildlife species, while for some Indigenous people, this responsibility is usually inverted.



Figure 3: The Dukha migrate around five or six times a year and use the reindeer primarily for riding and pack animals. Their migration routes have been limited after the establishment of a national park in their territory in 2011. Mongolia, 2012. Photo by the author.

Even when Indigenous people are recognized and included in projects, it is still hard for the different parties to agree on how to protect these places (Nadasdy, 2003; Blaser, 2009). The conflict between scientists and Indigenous communities on issues of conservation often does not stem from the fact that they take different sides. As I will argue, the main reason stems from their different understanding of what the natural world is and how to interact with it; more importantly, whose understanding of the world will be taken more seriously during the process of conservation? Political ecologists show that to come to an agreement in these conflicts, there are several important steps, such as breaking down strict dualities between humans/animals or nature/culture, understanding the importance of non-human agency and well-being, and more importantly looking at mainstream Western science through critical eyes (Borpoudakis, 2019).

Critical scholars emphasize the importance of examining how knowledge production is shaped by political factors, viewing this as a crucial aspect of decisions related to the management of national parks. The development of scientific thought and the validity of specific forms of knowledge have also been an important part of colonial exploitation since Western culture constantly reaffirms itself as the center of legitimate and civilized knowledge (Tuhiwai, 1999). This deeply rooted idea of superior knowledge systems and power relations between Western experts and aboriginal experts creates a hierarchical value system that denies Indigenous ontologies (Berkes, 2008; Sullivan, 2016; Acuña, 2015), in which Indigenous visions about nature are still not considered. Blaser, who has worked among the Yshiro hunters of Paraguay and studied the hunting

program there, explains how the biologists and the bureaucrats implicitly claim to have an epistemologically superior understanding of the environment because it was not clouded by culture (Blaser, 2009).

On the other hand, beyond discussions of power and different cultural perceptions of nature, many scholars today, under the umbrella of political ontology, take the discussion further, suggesting that disagreements between Indigenous people and the outsiders do not stem from different understandings of a single world. They actually talk about entirely different worlds. For example, De la Cadena (2010), in her Peruvian research, illustrates that during the protests of a mining project planned for one of the most important and sacred mountains in the region of Cusco, the mountain was perceived in distinct ways by different groups. While many environmentalists were worried about the loss of pastures in the area, the mining company saw it only as a source of gold and money, and the Indigenous people, who considered it a sacred area, were more worried about upsetting the spirit of the mountain. In other words, plural ontologies were involved, meaning there was a different understanding of how reality is constructed or how the world and its entities can be known (Sullivan, 2016).

While the dominant scientific environmental assumption is that there is only one "real" nature and humans should be kept separate from it to protect it, for most societies, the perception of the world does not consist of two categories: human and nature (Descola, 2005). Blaser (2009) explains the political ontology approach with the notion of "multinaturalism" (Viveiros de Castro, 1998), which identifies that there are many kinds of "natures" instead of one environment "out there." Therefore, when environmental conflicts arise, they are more than a struggle over nature, but also involve different and "asymmetrically entangled ontologies or worlds" (Blaser, 2009, p. 11), creating an ontological 'war of worlds' (Viveiros de Castro, 2015), and the possibility for plural cultural ontologies (Descola 2005).

According to Pedersen and Hoolbrad (2017), the ontological turn in which these debates are situated is not concerned with the "really real" nature of the world but instead keeps the horizon open for what an object of ethnographic investigation might be. Even when we compare different worlds, the way we describe them is mostly based on comparisons or understandings of our own culture, which means that the point of discussion usually starts with a culture (usually Western) as a base of comparison. As Heywood (2017) expresses, if things are relative, what are they relative to, or what is the background against which they are relative?

I explore these issues through the lens of political ontology, drawing on the case above, where I conducted extensive fieldwork over one year, spread across multiple visits between 2012 and 2017. I will address three questions:

- (1) What does hunting *mean* for Dukha hunters?
- (2) Do the Dukha and environmentalists perceive the environment in fundamentally different ways?
- (3) Is the strict link between hunting and animal populations, as determined by environmentalists, reflected in Dukha perspectives?

While discussing the different ontologies of the environment for the Dukha and environmentalists, I also aim to show the negative consequences of the conservation project in northern Mongolia for the Indigenous population.

3. The sentient landscape: *Jer-eezi* controlling hunting

One afternoon we were sitting in front of the tents chatting when Tumen, one of the young hunters returned from a daily hunting trip empty handed, for the third time. I knew that he was known as one of the skillful hunters in the taiga, so I was surprised and asked people, "Oh I wonder why he couldn't hunt, maybe there were no animals to hunt or he missed them?"

Purve, an elder woman sitting next to me was perplexed by my reaction, not being able to see any connection between hunting and the number of animals around or the technical skills of the hunter. Without

hesitation, she told me that this has nothing to do with it, he could know the reason only when he visits a shaman to see what was wrong.

A few weeks later, we were invited to the tent of Tumen to eat the small deer he finally managed to kill. When the evening was over, everyone was happy to have eaten fresh meat. Back in the tent, I asked my adopted mother in the taiga about it. She told me that Tumen went to see the shaman and found out that the reason he couldn't hunt successfully was because he didn't visit their *dailga* (sacred areas to multi-generational family members) and that is why the spirits were upset with him, and not offering their animals. He went there to make some offerings and after that, everything was back to normal. He could hunt again.

As is evident in this story, for the Dukha, the killing of animals is perceived as a gift from the spirits that is given to the hunters for their appropriate conduct, which makes hunting go far beyond a technical skill, but rather a proof of respectful relations with land spirits. While out in the taiga, both the Dukha and animals know that *jer-eezi*, translated literally as the "owner of the land" in Dukha language, provides justice for all and local spirit masters watch people all the time and judge their actions, ensuring the wellbeing of both the animals hunted, and the humans. According to Ingold (2000), this idea that animals are received by humans as a gift is widely reported among northern hunting peoples. The people who give gifts to the animal world or nature in the form of tobacco or food will receive animals to hunt in return (Tanner, 1979). Moreover, according to many hunter communities, if the animals are treated well and with respect, they will voluntarily offer themselves to the hunter (Laugrand & Oosten, 2015; Nadasdy, 2007; Ingold, 2000; Willerslev, 2004; Hamayon, 2012; Hill, 2011).

Most hunting societies believe that the animals that are hunted with respect will be reborn, meaning that people play an active role in the rebirth of nature by releasing the souls of the animals through their death (Jordan, 2003). This idea of a hunted animal coming back to life does not just ensure hunting ethics are maintained, but it also makes the act of hunting morally easier for the hunters. The life cycle is closely associated with this respect and belief in rebirth, which places hunting beyond death, as it is "conceived as a rite of regeneration" (Ingold, 2000, p. 67). This is why instead of trying to control and dominate their prey, the hunter should simply show respect to it and surrender to the land spirits by forming appropriate social relations. In other words, hunters are only in control of their own behavior so instead of worrying about the success of the hunt, they should worry about their own conduct.

For the Dukha, hunting is a way of communicating with the taiga and its spirits, and it serves as an important indicator to know how those relations are faring at a given period. For this reason, when the government wanted to encourage an end to hunting by paying them, this was far from being a solution for the Dukha, who saw it as an entirely unrelated proposal. In the cosmology of the Dukha, both animals and people are "children" of spirits, with whom they communicate through complex hunter-prey relations. The spirits give animals to the hunters if they behave with respect, but this gift is not specific to humans because people also used to practice sky burial, in which the dead are consumed by animals. We can explain this situation better with the idea of perspectivism, adapting it to a theory of gift-giving. According to Viveiros de Castro (1998), the way humans, animals, or spirits see themselves changes depending on whose perspective we take. Animals see themselves as humans see themselves. While humans see animals as animals, similarly, animals or spirits (predators) may see humans (prey) as animals. In other words, what they see depends on the body they have, and they "see themselves as persons" (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, pp. 470–471).

Examining gift giving from this perspective, when people leave their dead outdoors as sky burials, animals see this as a gift to themselves. In other words, there is reason to believe that humans are given as gifts to animals by spirits, the same way animals are given to humans. This idea is also present in the general worldview of the Dukha and their perception of death. Since illness or misfortune are regarded as punishment by the spirits, the death of a person usually shows that they broke a taboo and misbehaved "as an ultimate retribution for his prolonged consumption of animal flesh" (Hamayon, 1990, pp. 365–372). Especially in the case of hunters, when someone becomes ill or suffers for any unknown reason, the first thing that other hunters question is their behavior in past hunting trips, because the health of a person is related to their "ongoing or life-history of engagements with animals" and improper treatment of animals can cause damage or illness to themselves (Jordan, 2003, p. 105). From the perspective of animals, the same may also be true, since we do not

know why the individual animal that was hunted was given to the hunter as a gift from the spirits. This bilateral side of gift-giving or taking is another factor contributing to universal justice among people and animals. This is why once the animal is hunted, since it is the land spirits who give the animal to the hunter, the hunter "should accept it proudly, instead of feeling sorry for them" (Nadasdy, 2007, p. 28).

For all these reasons above, the hunting ban put in place by the National Park officials meant cutting off these relations with the entire landscape, both for humans and other nonhuman taiga dwellers. This reliance on nature's spirits constitutes one of the core values of Dukha cosmology and of hunting. The idea that spirits of the taiga offer gifts to people in the form of a hunt creates a reciprocal relation between parties. That is why the hunters were worried about offending spirits if they stopped hunting. The whole ritual of hunting indeed shows traces of this Dukha worldview, considering animals as beings with agency, as I will explain below.

4. Dukha hunting rituals

In this section, by briefly describing the understanding of animals and hunting among the Dukha community, I will try to show why hunting is more than a way of obtaining meat. It is also a way to show a deeper understanding of animals, a point missed by officials and the authorities. As mentioned above, the hunter should simply show respect to the animal and surrender to the land spirits by forming appropriate social relations. This means there are many moral codes of conduct to be followed during a hunt. In this regard, respect and trust in spirits is the key to a successful hunt and "lies at the center of the struggle to exist as a hunting culture" (Pelly, 2001, p. 27). For this reason, The Dukha traditionally have many taboos and rules of conduct that must be followed before, during, and after the hunt to ensure respectful behavior to the animals, which demonstrates that animals are considered as sentient beings.

The first important rule is in the preparation phase. A Dukha hunter should purify himself and his gun with juniper and make offerings to the spirits. It is important to be humble and not have too many expectations before going hunting, as excessive self-confidence can prevent the land spirits from offering their animals. One must surrender to the spirits, acknowledging their power, without assuming success. The hunters also refrain from using violent language like the word "killing" or talking about hunting in an ungrateful manner. This is why instead of saying, "I am going hunting," they would say, "I am going for a walk." Once the hunter finishes all his preparations, he is ready to go and should follow the basic principles of respectful hunting. These relate to what is hunted, how you hunt, how much, where, and how you deal with the dead animal afterwards. If a hunter respects the protocol of all those steps carefully, he ensures success. An important rule concerns which animals the hunter is supposed to and not supposed to kill. Animals that cannot be hunted under any conditions include pregnant animals, young animals in general, and some spirited animals called *eeli amitan*. These can be recognized for their unusual appearance or behavior. If there is a group of animals, a male would be chosen over the female since the latter's survival is more important for the continuation of the species. The given action or location of the animal is also significant, as a hunter can never shoot animals that are drinking water or sleeping. However, hunting a pregnant being is considered the worst violation, and there are many stories related to this taboo. This often leads transgressors to suffer from their mistake with many years of bad luck. To shoot an animal randomly without first noticing if this is a spirited animal or a pregnant animal may bring misfortune to the family of the hunter that can last for many generations. Therefore, the key skills to be a good hunter are observation and careful consideration.

Once the hunter has spotted the animal and decided it is permissible to kill it, the next step is to do it with respect. Showing respect to the hunted animal is translated by one of the simplest rules: ensuring the animal has a quick death, by aiming at places like the shoulders, or heart. Even though it would kill immediately, it is not permissible to shoot the head because it is where the soul of the animal resides and this is considered disrespectful.

The next rule to consider is how much a hunter is supposed to kill. This means a hunter should not kill any more than they need. Killing more than is required or not eating all of a kill, are considered extremely wasteful and these are big taboos (Küçüküstel, 2021).

Another important aspect of hunting is related to location. The Dukha's territory is filled with spirits, thus hunters should pay great attention to where they hunt so as not to offend any of them. There are many

spiritual places known as *eeli jerler* where hunting is considered taboo, because of an angry spirit owner at that location or sometimes because ancestral lands called *dailga* are sacred for certain families. Dukha believe that some spirits in these locations may be angry because of pollution or overhunting by humans in the past. So, ironically, they impose their own self-regulated hunting bans, effectively practicing conservation.

To summarize, hunters need highly developed hunting skills, but also the proper spiritual education to succeed in hunting. The consequences of a broken taboo are serious. Shooting the wrong animal or hunting in the wrong place can cause not just the hunter but also his family and even his herd to suffer for a long time. Besides, animals are considered sentient beings who can understand people and even make deals with them.

For instance, the Dukha have great respect for the bear and regard it as a relative. In fact, people never use the word bear, *irey*, for the animal and instead just call it *khairkhan*, which means "the great, almighty." Bears are still hunted and consumed with pleasure as long as the detailed rules and taboos for hunting them are followed. For instance, you cannot shoot bears from behind or without a warning. One of the most important rules for bears is an agreement made between bears and hunters years ago, that is, an agreement passed down from the ancestors of the Dukhas. According to this agreement, if a hunter sees a bear in the forest and the bear escapes and climbs a tree, the hunter will never shoot it. Similarly, if a person runs into a bear unarmed while walking in the forest, he must climb a tree because the bear never attacks a person who climbs one (Küçüküstel, 2013). People say that bears are smart enough to know this rule, so they would not attack, and if they do, the bear would suffer for the rest of its life. Because animals possess agency and will just like humans, hunting is a way of interacting with them and with *jer eezi*, the main spirit which translates to the owner of the land.

5. Is it possible to substitute game for meat?

For all those reasons mentioned above, when the Dukha territory was transformed into a national park in 2011, and the Mongolian state authorities obligated the Dukha to stop hunting, it was like asking to change their whole way of thinking and existing, as hunting is much more than merely a way of obtaining meat, it is a "spiritual activity" (Berkes, 2008, p. 31). The Dukha were worried that their relations with the land spirits and animals would be affected negatively if they didn't hunt. Although state authorities never formally included the Dukha in the conservation project, after a while they became aware that the hunters had no other means to support themselves, so they gave a basic stipend to everyone to buy meat from the village. Unaware of the complex reciprocal relations between people and the environment, they thought hunting was just a simple act for filling one's stomach.

In 2016, all families received some financial compensation from the Mongolian state to buy meat, and although the money was useful, it was not a solution. The Dukha who regularly interact with land spirits and have reciprocal relations with them (through hunting as a gift) would no longer be able to practice this unique understanding of the landscape as a provider. When individuals still wanted to hunt, they were criticized for being bold and covetous by officials. During one informal conversation in the village, both parties were insisting that the other didn't understand them. Tumursukh, who is responsible for the natural resources of the park, said in an interview with *The Guardian* that "the Dukha don't understand our work. Our goal is to preserve the taiga and create strictly protected areas in which humans will not be able to destroy nature" (Gauthier & Pravettoni 2016). So, the Dukha were still considered as destroyers of nature.

Beyond ontological discussions, the hunting ban and the provision of a stipend had immediate effects on Dukha social affairs and with other social impacts. Buying the supplies from the village, instead of exchanging them with the taiga spirits, meant that everyone had to travel there frequently now. Thus, more and more families were encouraged to move there, to sedentarize. Of course, families were happy to receive their stipend, which provided them with economic relief, but it also worsened drinking problems among some young men. Consumption of alcohol dramatically increased after the hunting ban since people had more cash, and also men who normally spent their time hunting were suddenly left unoccupied in long winters in the taiga and thus comforted themselves by drinking.

In a short time, the situation got much worse, and the ban not only caused trouble with state officials managing the Park but also internal to communities. In autumn 2015, some young hunters and young women took reindeer to a distant valley close to the Russian border and hunted a moose during the trip. However, when

they arrived back at the camp, they learned that the park rangers had followed them and found evidence of the kill, so the men were required to pay a big fine or face a prison sentence. This was a huge shock in the community, and the men had to go to the regional capital, Moron, for five months during the trial. At the end of the trial, they escaped punishment, but just the threat of a prison sentence was scary enough. Even worse than that, one of the park rangers who followed them was a Dukha man, their good friend. The effects were deep, and led to serious consequences, shaking the core values of their community. After the Park was created, the government employed two people from the taiga as park rangers, in addition to others from outside the community. This incident, the fact that someone inside the community reported on them, deeply abused the community's trust, affecting social relations in a way that has never been experienced before. It also created deep anger and disappointment.

The community experienced other direct impacts of the hunting ban, as hunting affects social relations in many ways, providing a product to be shared and a general system of providing people with equal access to resources. Sharing meat is particularly important and has been explored for several hunter-gatherer societies (Marshall, 1961; Ingold, 1980; Kelley, 1995; Woodburn, 1998). As Hamayon (2012, p.109) writes "no hunter anywhere in Siberia would ever keep a piece of game for himself, no more than he would ever steal meat. Sharing wild meat is an absolute principle, deeply internalized by all hunters." This meant that after each successful trip, the families usually gather in the hunter's tent and eat together. I also know from personal experience that these were some of the most cheerful and important social gatherings, bonding people together, through sharing what the land spirits offered to the community.

Long hunting trips also help to improve social relations. Wandering in the Siberian wilderness for many days, sometimes even a few weeks or months, in temperatures below -30 degrees C, sleeping outside by the fire, and surviving on what they can find, hunting is exhausting and difficult, but it is also rewarding. From the many stories I listened to and from observation on a few hunting trips, I can confidently claim that it is a way of being and socializing for the Dukha, much more than just survival. Hunting stories cheer people up on long cold nights in the taiga; it is also what motivates men and young boys for their upcoming trips. On hunting trips that last up to a few months, men spend a long time together, away from their wives or parents, which connects them in a different way, allowing them to develop a strong bond. Similarly, when men are out hunting for long periods, women in the camp bond in a different way with each other and those women only times also help them take more independent roles in their societies (Küçüküstel 2021). Lastly, the Dukha are always concerned about the challenge of transmitting traditional knowledge to the younger generation. With the hunting ban, young boys cannot learn these skills, and if they need to hunt in the future they will not know where to hunt, which animals, or about spiritual matters. They may behave incorrectly or in a disrespectful way.

6. Whose world should be taken seriously?

As I have noted, the Dukha were never formally included in the park's establishment, and when they brought up their concerns, the authorities were reluctant to discuss the matter further. Giving stipends to people for buying meat was a good and an easy solution from the perspective of the authorities, and it was hard to convince them that spirits are offended when people do not go hunting. This ontological dimension of hunting was not even a topic of negotiation or discussion since it was seen as a subject far from "scientific reality." A burning question then is whether the Dukha and environmentalists really perceive the environment in fundamentally different ways.

Many studies on political ontology discuss the existence of plural ontologies or worlds (as mentioned in the Introduction) between Western scientists and indigenous people. Bormpoudakis (2019) criticizes a polarized political ontology approach that makes a sharp distinction between "modern" and "Indigenous" perspectives. He suggests that modern societies don't necessarily hold a single dualistic view of nature, or, similarly, Indigenous people may experience internal conflicts on environmental issues.

Although I agree that the simplified homogenization of the parties presented in this article overlooks the internal divisions among the groups, the disagreements that emerge among the Indigenous communities themselves usually differ from the conflicts they have with "outsiders." For instance, even when a young Dukha hunted excessively or got involved in activities that the community perceived as harmful (such as working in

jade mines, which in the past were quite destructive for the taiga), the conflict was never about a lack of understanding of different worlds because even the people who conducted harmful behaviors would not claim that spirits don't exist. In fact, in all these incidences, people would later acknowledge that they were punished by spirits because of their harmful actions. Many hunters and their families still tell stories of misfortune dating back to the years when some Dukha men were hired as state hunters during the socialist regime. Just like the hunting ban, overhunting to provide meat for the state also had serious negative consequences in terms of relations with the land spirits, and I witnessed young hunters who are still today trying to make peace with the land spirits to compensate for what their fathers or grandfathers did in the past. In other words, just like in any society, some people may not follow the expected behavior of their Indigenous communities, but most of the time, they do not deny the existence of those rules. However, the conflicts with the conservationists could not even reach the discussion of spirits who are offended by the hunting ban, because this was already deemed too superstitious for the scientists to discuss.

On the other hand, the case of the Dukha in some ways does support looking beyond binaries (Bormpoudakis 2019). Both the Dukha and the people working for the natural park were from the same region. Biologists working for the park legitimately claimed that they are from herding families living in the surrounding villages, usually Mongol or Darhad people, so they are also native to the land. Indeed, other ethnic groups in Mongolia and the Dukha share many similarities in some aspects of their worldview (Fijn 2011). However, being from a similar ethnic background was not enough to prevent the conflicts between the Dukha and conservation authorities.

This suggests the ontological viewpoint of different cultures, societies, and actors is not the only source of difference (Blaser 2013). The conflict between the Dukha and conservationists involved the political ecology of complex power dynamics and daily practices of care. Individuals in the park authorities perceived the Dukha worldview as a cultural belief that their families also used to practice, but when they were in a position of power, following the state agenda was more important than keeping traditions that lacked a scientific basis.

The position of the Dukha community in the wider Mongolian context also had an effect on the conflict. As the smallest ethnic minority in Mongolia, the Dukha are usually perceived as "wild" people living in remote mountains. People are sometimes afraid of them since they are known to be strong shamans who may have dark powers (Kristen 2015). On top of that, their partial integration into modern society made their indigeneity questionable for many other Mongolians. Once, in an unofficial conversation in the village, a rancher complained to me about the Dukha not obeying park rules. When I told him about the meaning of hunting for the Dukha, his answer was ready, even without listening: "Oh they are so traditional when it comes to hunting, but they enjoy receiving tourists in summers!" Implying that having tourists in their camps was spoiling their "indigeneity" so they didn't have the right to talk about their ancestral traditions. The perception of the Dukha in Mongolian society has been oscillating between two extremes in recent years, from "uncivilized wild nomads" to a "spoiled touristic tribe," and this affected the way power relations with the park authorities.

Stereotypical viewpoints, or widely held discourses of indigeneity, placed the Dukha in a vulnerable position during the establishment of the Park. While the Dukha were more open to understanding the perspective of biologists, the discussion of spirits was not even a possibility for the state authorities. The Dukha mentioned to me many times that they understood that animal populations could be decreasing (although that was not their observation), and they were open to limitations on hunting, as long as they could still hunt so that the relations with the spirits were completely severed. The mainstream education they received was also one of the factors that made it easier for the Dukha to understand the "scientific approach," yet being native to the area didn't help the scientists understand the Dukha. This asymmetry in understanding reflects broader patterns seen in similar cases worldwide: Indigenous communities, often in vulnerable positions, must navigate and negotiate external frameworks of power while their own perspectives remain marginalized (Lassila 2025). Even when conservationists share ethnic or regional ties with local communities, as in this case, their practices of care and interaction with the land often differ sharply from those of Indigenous peoples.

This brings us to another core issue: how daily practices of subsistence and care with the landscape are maintained. Indigenous people who live in their territories usually have valuable knowledge about their land and care deeply about these places, which are not just a resource but a living entity inhabited by nonhuman

entities who must be respected. They have strong emotional and spiritual attachments to their home. Conservationists, on the other hand, are usually involved in this discussion as part of their professional career and do not live in the areas that they are trying to protect. As Ingold (1994) states, the approach of Indigenous people in conservation is different to that of the scientists since "caring for an environment is like caring for people: requires a deep, personal and affectionate involvement, an involvement not just of mind or body but of one's entire, undivided being" (Ingold, 1994, p. 12).

7. Conclusion

The Dukha, who still live in the taiga and interact with its spirits and other nonhuman entities daily, are concerned about refusing the gifts of spirits, and offending them. This is more important than the meat they obtain from hunting. The conservationists responsible for the park and for protection of nonhuman species now live far from the world of spirits and hunting, despite their proximate local backgrounds. The conflict described in this article is shaped by the connection of the parties to the landscape, rather by a binary opposition between science and Indigenous belief systems. For this reason, I suggest that ontological conflicts should be evaluated carefully and case-by-case, because there are nuances and differences that apply to each situation.

The concern of Dukha people about offending the spirits as a result of the hunting ban serves as a powerful reminder that conservation is not merely about preserving biodiversity but also about honoring the intricate relationships that sustain both human and nonhuman life. How the Dukha interact with animals, how they perceive this hunting ban, and the long-term effects of it on society illustrate the dramatic consequences that protected areas have on local communities, especially when they are imposed, rather than involving the groups that inhabit them.

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