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Conceptualising spiritscapes

The Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai World Heritage site and the wider biocultural landscape

Bas Verschuuren

The Mongolian Altai is part of the larger Altai mountain range extending 2,000 km from the Gobi Desert to the plains of West Siberia and across the borders of the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, China, and Mongolia. The Altai can historically be seen as a place of high biocultural diversity where different cultures, languages, religions, and knowledge systems have become entangled with an incredibly diverse and distinctive natural environment. The traces of this biocultural diversity are found across the landscape and are alive in the cultures of the people that inhabit them. This case study builds on the mutually interdependent and entangled cultural and natural heritage of the *Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai* (UNESCO 2011), inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2011. The case study exemplifies how some of the intangible and spiritual dimensions of this World Heritage site amount to an understanding of the cultural landscape as a spiritscape.

The World Heritage listing describes the *Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai* as consisting of three complexes which comprise an abundance of separate concentrations of rock markings (10,000 compositions with each composition including from 1 to 100 images) and other cultural features across these site complexes. Collectively these complexes – Aral Tolgoi, Upper Tsagaan Gol, and Tsagaan Salaa-Baga Oigor – are governed and managed as protected areas, the distance between them is 40 km and 35 km, respectively. They cover a total area of 11,300 ha (21,000 ha including buffer zones) and are located in the province of Bayan-Ulgii in the Altai Mountains of far-western Mongolia (Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO 2010).

The *Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai* is listed under World Heritage criterion (iii): ‘bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared’ (UNESCO 2019, paragraph 77). The key features or attributes that underpin the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property focus on rock art; notably, the number and ‘quality’ (10,000 compositions of which each composition consists of 1 to 100 images), the time range represented by the rock art (from the late Pleistocene 18,000 years ago to the late Holocene 700–900 CE) and the settings of the three site complexes in mountain valleys and high mountain steppes.

The explanation of the OUV of the *Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai* is essentially technical and established by disciplinary experts to conform with the official processes and guidance available under the *World Heritage Convention* (UNESCO 2019). In the case of the Altai, OUV draws on the academic discipline of art history to describe the importance of rock art while also expressing an environmental determinist perspective (i.e., that environmental qualities determine human actions including the practice of rock marking). The World Heritage nomination document draws connections between past rock art styles, past communities, and climatic variability but it does not mention how the rock art might be related to (the practice of) contemporary rock markings and other cultural features in and of the landscape, such as sacred natural sites, stupas, and *ovuns* (piles of rocks, sticks, and cloth marking a sacred place). Studies, such as by Richard Kortum (2014), investigate ritual landscape using a multidisciplinary approach for the study of rock markings including their pictorial detail, chronological distribution, and spatial organisation. Kortum also relates rock art to stone surface monuments in order to learn about the lifeways, arts, ideas, and technologies of ancient cultures. However, Kortum's ritual landscape does not include taking multiple ontologies (i.e., concepts of being and the relationships between them) as a starting point, suggested in this case study as a means for understanding spiritscapes.

Viewing the practice of rock marking as an enactment, a way to substantiate and materialise an ontology or worldview, contributes to radically new ways of understanding the multiplicity of landscape (or the 'landscape multiple'; cf. Mol 2002). Together with the rock art, natural features and cultural components form the tangible elements of the landscapes to which people attribute a wide range of meanings and values, such as aesthetic values but also the value of traditional crafts as emphasised in the World Heritage nomination. In the context of the landscape, these values can be studied from a spatial, religious, anthropological, and even art history perspectives. In doing so, scholars and heritage practitioners have become accustomed to talking about cultural landscapes (Plumwood 2006). Viewing the landscape as multiple allows us to see beyond the scope and qualities as well as the limitations of the World Heritage designation. Other values attached to the landscape not explicitly recognised and explicated in the nomination, such as cultural, religious, and spiritual values, are of importance to a diversity of cultural groups that produce or enact different realities (Mol 2014). Drawing on Brown and Verschuuren (2019), the next section describes how viewing cultural landscapes as *biocultural* and *entangled* supports the understanding of the landscape as a spiritscape. Some of the possible implications for practitioners working on cultural landscapes are explored in a general sense as well as in the context of the *Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai* World Heritage Site.

Biocultural landscapes and intangible dimensions

The term *biocultural landscape* stems from the concept of *biocultural diversity* which in turn has its roots in a broadening of the concept of biodiversity with cultural elements, in an attempt to relate biodiversity to people; and to place Indigenous peoples as central to conservation rather than seeing them as 'threats' (Hathaway 2012, p. 37). Biocultural diversity was also embraced its ability to link human and ecological wellbeing and underpins the concept of the *biocultural landscape* (Plumwood 2006; Verschuuren et al. 2014). Bridgewater and Rotherham (2019) analyse the evolution of the concept of biocultural diversity and in their analysis link some of its foundational research and policy development to cultural landscapes. In doing so, they clarify the way the paradigm has manifested itself relative to the field of conservation, although they do not undertake an exhaustive analysis of literature in the field of cultural heritage studies. In this field, the term biocultural landscape gained considerable importance in relation to the concept of cultural landscape – adopted in 1992 as a category within the World Heritage Convention's

Operational Guidelines (UNESCO 2019, Annex 3) – and was increasingly critiqued for ‘maintaining a dichotomy between nature and culture, and for its anthropocentric construction’ (Head 2010, p. 439). Brown and Verschuuren (2019, p. 171) argue that ‘a biocultural landscape is constituted through mutual intra-actions (or entanglements) of socio-ecological systems in ways that make nature-culture inseparable’.

Following this perspective, the ritualised landscape of the Mongolian Altai exhibits a geography of rock markings providing a deep time perspective on human habitation and interaction with the landscape (Figure 4.12.1). The earliest images are of mammoth, auroch, ostrich, and



Figure 4.12.1 Rock markings located on a hillslope above a pastoral winter camp comprise engraved animal compositions as well as modern-day painted ‘graffiti’. The markings, covering a period of several thousand years, provide a deep time perspective on human habitation and interaction with the landscape, including spiritual links to place.

Photo: B. Verschuuren, 16 October 2014.

other species now long extinct. Later depictions bear relevance to the recent past and today (e.g., argali sheep, ibex, nomadic camps, carts), and some refer to shamanic, or perhaps spiritual, practices and spirits. While we can only speculate about the role of these rock markings and the motives of the people who made them (Jacobson-Tepfer and Meacham 2016), it is helpful to see the images as interconnected parts of the landscape linking past and present cultures and worldviews. As such, I suggest that rock markings are a form of biocultural phenomena, rather than tangible subjects to be studied through the lens of a singular discipline. Caillon et al. (2017) propose that interactions between multiple ontologies is a key aspect of taking a biocultural approach to conservation. This not only opens new perspectives for understanding the cultural landscape of the Altai but it also provides an opportunity for considering the interpretation of the role of rock markings by various cultural groups. Another key aspect introduced by Caillon et al. (2017) is that of dual feedback loops (i.e., cultural and natural factors are seen as interrelated and affecting one another) which helps in moving beyond an environmentally deterministic perspective on cultural phenomena. In fact, the idea of dual feedback loops enables the creation of a more complete understanding of the interconnected character of cultural, spiritual, and social values that make up the intangible dimensions of the Altaian spiritscape – both past and present.

Seeing the Altaian spiritscape

‘Spiritscape’ is a concept that has been used and defined differently by various scholars in natural and cultural heritage conservation, mostly focusing on dimensions of governance, law, and the identification of values or significance in conservation (Verschuuren et al. 2021). The concept requires a radically different way of conceptualising landscapes as it challenges multicultural and radical perspectivism by taking multi-naturalism as a starting point. In its most radical form this means that rather than assuming that different people attach different values to the same landscape, one has to consider that different landscapes materialise from the enactment of different ontologies that people hold and express (Latour 2011). Thus, an art historian enacts a different Altaian landscape than a Tuvan shaman (the Altai is neighboured by the Republic of Tuva, with ethnically distinct people known as Tuvans) because their ontologies are part of different worldviews; for example, the academic field of art history situated in Western science and the tradition of shamanism as a cultural practice passed down over many generations as part of a distinctive knowledge system. While such contemplations challenge heritage practitioners and scholars alike, they also bring to light new dimensions, and possibly new ways, of working with and thinking about cultural landscapes. Returning to the paradigm of biocultural landscapes, Merçon et al. (2019) point out that, besides their ontological and epistemological dimensions, cultural landscapes have a political dimension. The politics of biocultural landscapes inevitably determine whether the spiritscape, including the values and knowledge systems of a cultural group, is considered alongside other representations of landscape. The cultural landscape constructed by experts in the conservation of natural and cultural heritage – as is common in World Heritage – is bound to a different politics, law, and governance system than are most biocultural landscapes and spiritscapes.

The spiritual significance of cultural landscapes often evolves around the agency of spirits (more-than-human beings) that imbue certain features of the landscape with spiritual meaning (e.g., sacred natural sites and places of prayer, worship, burial, or divination; Verschuuren et al. 2010). In Indigenous societies the world over, sacred natural sites are central to people’s wellbeing because they are the home of deities, spirits, or ancestors which often play an integral role in the governance of natural resources and the wider landscape (Verschuuren 2016). As deities, spirits, and ancestors are such a characteristically defining aspect of Indigenous peoples’

relationship with the landscape, these enactments of landscape have been described as a ‘spiritscape’ by McNiven (2004), Studley and Horsley (2019), and Verschuuren (2016).

The landscape becomes a spiritscape because it is animated with ancestors, spirits, creator beings, and other mythological or symbolic figures that imbue it with spiritual energies, life, and sentience. Plants, animals, and other natural denizens of the landscape can be seen as expressions of spiritual significance, as sacred beings that are central in the constitution of spiritscapes. According to Studley and Horsley (2019), the spiritscape paradigm is characterised by psycho-spiritual connections which are enacted through ritual and ceremony and preceded over by spiritual guides, shamans, or custodians who maintain harmony and good relations between all the elements (human, natural, and spiritual) of their cosmologies.

Spiritscapes are enacted and come into being when people perform their cultural and spiritual beliefs in the landscape through their behaviours and practices. Australian Aboriginal song-lines, for example, link places in the landscape such as specific natural features, rock art sites, and places of ceremony to the ancestral spirits that once created them in a time called the Dreamtime (McNiven 2004). Performing the songs, practicing ceremony, and creating art are ways to perform and maintain the spiritscape and are in themselves expressions of distinct ontologies and worldviews (Verschuuren et al. 2007). Such relational ontologies are typical of spiritscapes. In Guatemala, the Maya recognise places in the landscape that have heightened spiritual significance because they have been described in the *Popul Vuh* (creation story) as places that explain the creation of the world and all the things in it by the Maya ancestors (Verschuuren and Gomez 2022). These places are linked to the Maya calendar defining a cyclical and timely performance of ceremony in which spiritual guides evoke ancestors, transfer wisdom, perform healing, and restore cosmological balance (Verschuuren and Gomez 2022).

In the Altai, like in Australia, Guatemala, and elsewhere in the world, spiritscapes are defined by relational ontologies and worldviews brought into being by engagement, attachment, and enactment of the landscape (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). In the Altaian spiritscape, sacred natural sites and other places of spiritual significance play key roles in the lives of past and present cultural and religious groups such as Tuvan Bon Shamans, Tibetan Buddhists, Turkic warriors, Islamic Kazakh herders, and many others. Spiritscapes are thus intangible as much as they are tangible, they are enacted in a landscape where to local people (and often a wider cultural group) spirits determine its significance and that of the features in it. Nature conservationists have come to define such *natural* features as ‘sacred natural sites’ whereas in World Heritage terminology cultural heritage specialists have defined *natural* along with *cultural* features as ‘attributes’ (Verschuuren et al. 2021). In the *Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai* these attributes are predominantly rock markings, while many other spiritually significant features could also have been described as attributes in the World Heritage nomination. Challenges exist with technical language across disciplines as well as philosophical dimensions of the landscape and this has implications for the heritage practitioners working with spiritscapes. For example, is a natural feature in the landscape – such as the sacred Altai mountain Shiveet Khairkhan (Figure 4.12.2) – a place that should be called an attribute when people attribute value to it? As a home of a deity, it is imbued with spiritual power, but is that spiritual power attributed to this feature or does it, as many Indigenous Tuvans believe, exist regardless of whether humans recognise it as such?

The global phenomena of sacred mountains (cf. Bernbaum 1997) is known to be widespread throughout Mongolia and is recognised in some cultural World Heritage Sites, such as the Great Burkhan Khaldun Mountain and its surrounding sacred landscape (UNESCO 2020). Their sacredness has often been a key driver in these nominations. In the Mongolian Altai, eight sacred mountains constitute a sacred geography of the wider Altaian spiritscape but has not informed the nomination of the World Heritage Site (Jacobson–Tepfer and Meacham 2012). For



Figure 4.12.2 In the Mongolian Altai, the sacred mountain Shiveet Khairkhan (*centre top*) is part of a group of eight sacred mountains located within the wider Mongolian Altai landscape. Shiveet Khairkhan has spirit actors which play a significant role in the current governance and management arrangements of the local nomadic pastoral communities.

Photo: B. Verschuuren, 16 October 2014.

example, the sacred mountain Shiveet Khairkhan (Figure 4.12.2) plays a significant role in current governance and management arrangements of the local nomadic tribes who may be Shamanists, Buddhists, Muslims, or practice a syncretised version of these religions (Jacobson-Tepfer and Meacham 2016). Sacredness is enacted through rituals that enable communication with a resident spirit, a concept termed ‘spiritual governance’ by some authors (Studley and Horsley 2019; Verschuuren 2016). The traditional governance system, influenced by spirits, means that it is forbidden to access Shiveet Khairkhan or hunt ibex on its western slopes, and the relevant rules and regulations stem from shamanism but are also respected by the Buddhist and Islamic inhabitants of the region. Buddhist monasteries typically have ritual enclosures around them, areas where no hunting is allowed and where strict rules apply to the harvest and use of natural resources. Based on examples of syncretism between Buddhism and pre-Buddhist animist beliefs elsewhere in Asia, it is likely that such monasteries’ origins likely overlap with the areas inhabited and governed by the resident spirits of pre-Buddhist times.

The spiritscape of the Mongolian Altai tells of human–nature connections past and present. Today, a small population of Tuvan people maintains a tradition of hunting using trained eagles and shamanistic practices while Buddhist believers have built on these practices, further ritualising the landscape. Kazakh herders leave visible marks of death rituals on the landscape manifest in large wooden pagodas that form the last resting places of their ancestors’ spirits, places of ceremony and remembrance. Throughout the landscape *ovvuu*s mark places for people to link to spiritual meanings (e.g., walking around the rock piles three times to bring a prosperous

journey), while at the larger *ovuns* religious ceremonies are regularly conducted. Past cultures, such as the Turkic groups, have also left their marks on the landscape in the form of Kurghans (burial mounds), surface monuments, and signposts, marking significant places of which the spiritual significance may not be considered in today's management regimes. While these places and their surface monuments form part of Mongolia's cultural heritage, they are foremost a part of the spiritscapes of local people who see those places as part of their own living heritage and cultures. Many of these culturally and spiritually significant places are sung in genres and performance styles passed down (e.g., in Kazakh herder communities living in Mongolia). Their songs are enshrined in the Altaian spiritscape and bear testimony to a unique ethnic heritage (Post 2020). This sung heritage is closely related to the land, mobility, pastoralism, and cultural identity and deeply tied up in political processes of change which inevitably takes place as culturally diverse human and spirit worlds meet.

Spiritscapes, moving beyond the biocultural

Because spiritscapes are created through the ontologies and epistemologies of different cultural groups, their politics are often contested in the World Heritage system, despite the recognition of the category of 'associative cultural landscapes' (UNESCO 2019, Annex 3). Giving equal weight to different enactments of spiritscapes within the framing of cultural landscapes requires Indigenous (and also mainstream faith) representation in the process of nomination, as well as the management and governance of World Heritage Sites (see Disko and Tugehdhat 2014). Natural and cultural heritage practitioners alike require guidance with striking a balance between theory and practice while also seeking to recognise and accommodate the cultural and spiritual significance of various groups of stakeholders and duty bearers (Verschuuren et al. 2021). The spiritscape expands on the meaning of heritage making the concept of cultural landscape increasingly complex, political, and inclusive. In doing so, there is also a growing notion of the interdependencies and co-creation of the biocultural landscape and the promise that engaging with a diversity of ontologies may assist in facing not only heritage places but also the environmental challenges these landscapes face.

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