

Nomadic Pastoralism among  
the Mongol Herders



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# Nomadic Pastoralism among the Mongol Herders

*Multispecies and Spatial Ethnography  
in Mongolia and Transbaikalia*

*Charlotte Marchina*

Amsterdam University Press



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## Note on transliteration and translations

The terms in vernacular languages are indicated in italics. All translations are mine. Except for quotations, Mongolian verbs are given in the form of the future infinitive-participle (e.g. *dasakh*). Mongolian and Buryat nouns are always presented in the singular.

For the rules on Cyrillic transliteration, intended to facilitate the reading of vernacular terms (in Mongolian, Buryat and Russian) for readers unfamiliar with these languages, follow the table below. The indicative pronunciation is given on the basis of English. In cases where a whole word is presented, the sound of the letter corresponds to the part of the word in bold. This transliteration also applies to Mongolian and Russian bibliographical references. When authors of these nationalities have published in English or French, I have kept the author's name as it was transliterated, which explains variations or irregularities (e.g. Minzhigdorj).

The names of ethnic groups or places in the English language are spelled as usual (e.g. Buryat, Gobi, Ulan-Ude).



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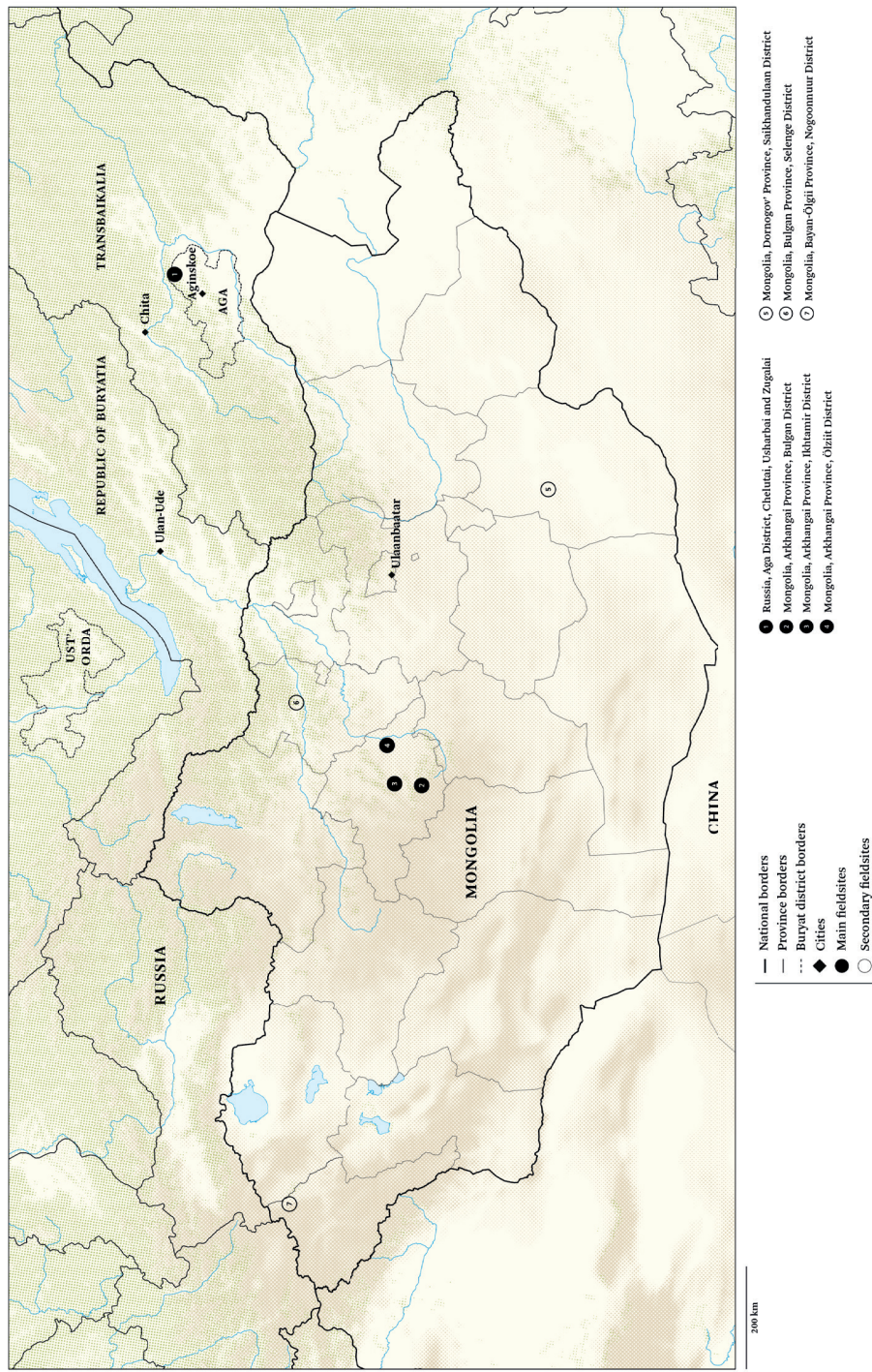
# Transliteration table

Cyrillic	Transliteration	Pronunciation
А, а	A, a	a
Б, б	B, b	b
В, в	V, v	v
Г, г	G, g	g ('go')
Д, д	D, d	d
Е, е	Ye, ye (Mn., Br.); E, e (Ru.)	ye ('yay')
Ё, ё	Yo, yo	yo
Ж, ж	J, j	dj (Mongolian); zh ('treasure') (Buryat, Russian)
З, з	Z, z	dz (Mongolian); z (Buryat, Russian)
И, и	I, i	i
Й, й	I, i	y ('yak')
К, к	K, k	k
Л, л	L, l	l
М, м	M, m	m
Н, н	N, n	n
О, о	O, o	o
Ө, ө (Mn., Br.)	Ö, ö	euh/ur ('fur')
П, п	P, p	p
Р, р	R, r	r
С, с	S, s	s
Т, т	T, t	t
У, у	U, u	between o and oo (Mongolian); oo (Buryat, Russian)
Ү, ү (Mn., Br.)	Ü, ü	oo ('boot')
Ф, ф	F, f	f
Х, х	Kh, kh	between 'ich' and 'ach' (German)
Һ, һ (Br.)	H, h	h ('hello')
Ц, ц	Ts, ts	ts
Ч, ч	Ch, ch	ch
Ш, ш	Sh, sh	sh
Щ, щ	Shch, shch	between sh and ch
Ъ	"	[hard sign: not pronounced]
Ы, ы	Y, y	i (Mongolian); back i (Buryat, Russian)
Ь	'	[soft sign: palatalizes the preceding consonant]
Э, э	E, e	e ('fed')
Ю, ю	Yu, yu	yu ('you')
Я, я	Ya, ya	ya



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Figure 1 Location map of the fieldwork sites





# Introduction

## Nomadizing among the Mongols

In the summer of 2008, as a young anthropology student with only a fragile base in Mongolian language and culture, I embarked on my first field trip to Mongolia. Not knowing how to say ‘nomadic pastoralism’, I responded to any Mongolians who asked me what had brought me to their country that I was studying ‘animal husbandry’ (*mal aj akhui*). It was only much later that I learned that I could not have picked a better term: Mongolians do not really speak of ‘nomadic’ husbandry, just of husbandry, because Mongolian husbandry is almost always nomadic. In fact, herders do not use the term ‘nomad’ (*nüüdelchin*) to speak about themselves (see Gardelle 2010: 24). This term, and probably the term ‘husbandry’ (*mal aj akhui*), seems to have only appeared in the first half of the twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> with the introduction of lifestyles and activities previously absent or associated with other nationalities, particularly Russian and Chinese (agriculture, mining, trading activities) (see Legrand 1975: 62). Nowadays, bookshops throughout Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital, sell encyclopaedic accounts of the various aspects of Mongolian ‘nomadic pastoralism’ (*nüüdliin mal aj akhui*) or ‘nomadic culture’ (*nüüdliin soyol*); but when a Mongolian herder is asked what he does, he answers that he is a ‘herder’ (*malchin*; someone who takes care of the livestock, *mal*).

As a Russian speaker, and with four months’ experience in the Mongolian field, I decided to extend my study of nomadic pastoralism to the Mongols located on the other side of the border, the Buryats of Russia. This, unfortunately, provided me with another opportunity to confirm my ignorance about the concepts of nomadic pastoralism here. I knew that in Russia there were more ways of practising pastoralism, especially in sedentary forms, so I searched for a situation that was comparable to Mongolia. This time, however, knowing that the term ‘nomad’ was commonly used in Russian (*kochevnik*),

<sup>1</sup> The term is mentioned in the Mongolian-Russian dictionary of Cheremisov and Rumyantsev (1937), while it remains absent from those of Kowalewski (1844) and Mostaert (1941).

when I arrived in Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Buryat Republic, I asked if I could stay with a family of yurt-living ‘nomads’ in the Buryat District of Aga (Transbaikalian region). But my hosts and their relatives in Aga, whom they contacted to help me find a family there, were quite surprised – not only was no one living in yurts any more, but it was considered incongruous that I could look for ‘nomads’ there. I was mortified by my mistake. I had let myself be misled by the tourist postcards in town and by reading some late-twentieth-century Russian ethnographic books describing the ‘traditional’ life of the Buryat herders, leading me to imagine the steppes of Transbaikalia as being similar to those of Mongolia. Disappointed, I left for the village of Aga, where I was happily surprised to learn that many herders in the region did continue to ‘nomadize’ (*kochevat*, in Russian). When I explained that I was researching the ‘nomads’ of Mongolia and Transbaikalia, however, the Buryat herders were perplexed. They understood why I had gone to Mongolia, but didn’t see the connection with my stay here. It quickly became apparent that the term ‘nomads’ referred to herders who ‘live in the old way’ (*jīvut po staromu*), on ‘encampments’ (*stoibishche*); in short, nomads were ‘primitive’ people (*primitivnye*), to use their term – Mongolian or Siberian reindeer herders were ‘nomads’, they were not. But didn’t they themselves travel several times a year, I asked? Yes, of course, they ‘nomadize’ (*kochevat* in Russian, *nüüdelkhe* in Buryat), they said, moving from one seasonal station to another, but that did not make them ‘nomads’. And so it transpired that, as in Mongolia and Russian Transbaikalia, I went to live and work not with ‘nomads’, but with herders who nomadize.

## On both sides of the Mongolian-Russian border

Mongolian-speaking peoples live in three adjacent countries: the Republic of Mongolia (with about 3 million people), the Russian Federation (about 650,000, mostly in the Republic of Buryatia and the two Buryat districts on either side of Lake Baikal, but also in the Republic of Kalmykia) and the People’s Republic of China (about 6 million, mostly in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region); I have chosen to use the term ‘Mongols’ to refer to all Mongolian ethnic groups, whether within or outside the borders of Mongolia, while ‘Mongolians’ will refer to citizens of Mongolia. This book deals only with nomadic pastoralism among the Mongols in Mongolia and Russia: in Mongolia, I stayed with the Khalkh – the majority ethnic group in Mongolia – and in Russia with the Buryats. The Buryats are one of the few Mongolian ethnic groups to be simultaneously present



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in Russia, China and Mongolia, though they make up the overwhelming majority in Russia.

In 1923, during the Soviet period, the Mongolian-Buryat Autonomous Soviet Republic was created north of Mongolia, on Russian territory. The term 'Mongolian' was withdrawn in 1958. Since then, it appears that the Buryats have been excluding themselves from the Mongolian community, which they associate with a form of archaism; the Mongolians of Mongolia also exclude them from it (Billé 2015: 79; Bulag 1998: 178ff.). The Buryats are, in their own words, in-betweeners: neither Russian nor Mongolian, not even really Buryats. Real Buryats, they told me, can only be found in China, where they continue to live in yurts and speak their language fluently, while they themselves only speak Russian with a Buryat accent and a Russianized Buryat. The Buryats I met did not identify themselves with the term 'Mongol', but readily admitted that they were 'Mongolian-speaking' (*mongoloyazychnye*), since Buryat is a language close to standard Mongolian (*Khalkh*). Here I was faced with herders who were not only not nomads, but nevertheless nomadized, and who were not Mongols but had a Mongolian language and culture. For these reasons, as well as for convenience, I use in this book the term 'Mongolians' for the Khalkh Mongols of Mongolia, and 'Buryats' for the Buryat Mongols of Russia.

These two Mongolian peoples have developed similar forms of animal husbandry, under similar ecological conditions, but in different social, economic and political contexts. In fact, differences can be found even within cultures: the Buryats from the Aga District in Transbaikalia are the most eastern Buryats in Russia, and differ from the western Buryats of Cisbaikalia in that they are more pastoralist and nomadic. Culturally close, the Mongolians and the Aga Buryats practise extensive husbandry based on the complementary nature of the different species that are bred, mainly in a steppe environment: horses, camels, cattle, sheep and goats. The meat of all these animals is consumed (with the exception of camels among the Buryats), as is milk among the Mongolians; the Buryats only consume cow's milk. Horses are used as riding animals in both territories, but camels are used additionally in Mongolia. And while in Aga only sheep's wool is exploited, Mongolian herders use or resell all the body products that their animals, living or dead, can provide (wool, hair, leather).

The Soviet period was characterized by widespread collectivization, both for pastoralists in southern Siberia (Humphrey 1998, among the Buryats) and for those in the Mongolian People's Republic (Legrand 1975), then a satellite state of the USSR. Under these socialist regimes, in Mongolia and Siberia, but also more widely across Central Asia, nature and animals were

considered to be rationally exploited and dominated (Charlier 2015: 18; Petric 2013: 10). The establishment of collective structures (*negdel* in Mongolia, *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* in Russia) was accompanied by a specialization of the herder's work by species. The orientation of livestock husbandry became resolutely productivist: the best herders were honoured and evaluated on the basis of livestock birth rates (Legrand 1975: 239). Zootechnics, which aims to increase the productivity of husbandry systems but also to establish economic rationality and excessive specialization (Porcher 2002: 27-34) has played an increasing role, particularly in Russia. The massive motorization of the socialist era finally led to a decline in camel herds, the preferred pack animal for nomadization, from the 1960s onwards (Valdenaire 1999: 89). This decline was particularly brutal in Aga, where in 2012 there were only about 20 camels, owned for symbolic reasons by a cooperative in the village of Tsagan-Ola: traditionally, the Mongolian people jointly raise the 'five muzzles' (*tavan khoshuu mal* in Mongolian, *taban khoshuun mal* in Buryat); camels, horses, cattle, sheep and goats. In Mongolia, as in Aga, the herders live outside the villages – creations of socialism for the most part – on their encampment (in Mongolia) or their station/farm (in Russia). It can be said that the administrative divisions of Mongolian districts (*sum*) are comparable to those of the territories of Russian villages (*selo*): the administrative district has the same name as the only village it comprises and where the school, administrative, social and cultural services, shops, etc., are located.

During the Soviet period, clear differences already existed between the two regions: the Buryat people had started to adopt solid housing (wooden) and were cultivating vegetable gardens on their station, where they also raised pigs and poultry. But from the 1990s onwards, the contrast between the two areas became particularly marked, especially in the organization of livestock husbandry. After the fall of the socialist regimes, the imposed collective system was shattered in Mongolia, while the structures of the *kolkhozes* remained with the Buryats in the Aga District. This partial decollectivization was characterized initially by the maintenance of collective structures, despite the decollectivization and privatization of livestock. The reform policies carried out in Russia in the early 1990s were aimed at transforming collective farms into private farms. This attempt did not really achieve its goals among the Buryats (see Humphrey 1998), unlike with other Siberian peoples, such as the Yakuts (Crate 2006): despite these reforms, most Buryat farms inherited from the Soviet era were initially maintained as cooperatives (Kradin 2004 and 2008; Marchina 2017). These cooperatives, with different functions and statutes depending on the village, mostly kept



their former name, the one of the *kolkhoz*; and although the majority of these structures have an official cooperative status, they are still commonly called '*kolkhoz*' (*kolkhoz*). The name of the former *kolkhoz* is still informally used today to refer to the entire village: 'Ulan-Odon' (meaning 'Red Star' in Russianized Buryat) for the village of Ortui, 'Drujba' (meaning 'Friendship' in Russian) for Tsagan-Chelutai and 'Pobeda' (meaning 'Victory' in Russian) for Aga-Khangil, etc. Therefore, while Mongolian herders have returned to domestic production-oriented breeding, many Buryat pastoralists remain employed in collective structures, a direct heritage of the *kolkhoz*.

Several other recent factors have reinforced the differences between Buryat and Mongolian herders, including the ongoing land privatization policy in Russia and the influence of a Russian presence on Buryat farms. Most of the pastoralists in Aga employ (primarily Russian) auxiliary workers (*pomoshchnik* in Russian; there is no Buryat term). They are employed on a more or less permanent basis – from a few weeks to a year – to assist or even replace their employers in pastoral work. The auxiliaries generally come from villages in the Russian districts bordering the Aga District, and are often looking for shelter and food due to widespread unemployment and alcoholism. While relations between the herders and their employees are generally good, there is a striking reversal of ethnic relations concerning domination. Indeed, while at the federal and provincial levels it is mainly the Russians who are in a position to make decisions, hierarchical relations are reversed on the Buryat herders' stations at a local level. Some pastoralists blame their auxiliaries for being ignorant or lacking initiative with regards to animal husbandry, and complain that they are forced to speak Russian in order to communicate. This obvious Buryat domination is, however, purely limited to the farm and is also inflicted on the few Buryat auxiliaries. The Buryat term, to designate commonly, though colloquially, to a Russian, *mangad* (*mangaduud*, in the plural), refers to the enemy of the Buryat epic hero, 'the one who invades his territory, monopolizes his property, appropriates his wife, and who, for the wrong he does to him, is condemned to be defeated even though he is the strongest' (Hamayon 1990: 88). When I asked about the use of this term, the pastoralists told me that they didn't know its origin or associate any negative connotation with it, for them it was the same as the more formal term *oroduud* (literally, 'Russians').

The presence of auxiliaries with non-Buryat ethnic origins (Russian and Khamnigan, in particular) has already been noted by Caroline Humphrey (1998). This trend has nevertheless been accentuated by the economic crisis of 2008, which encouraged potential auxiliaries to turn to the Aga District for work, as it is relatively more prosperous than the neighbouring districts,

**Picture 1** Russia, Aga District

and by the recent merger of the Aga District with the neighbouring Russian region: the Ust'-Orda Buryat District merged with the Irkutsk Province, while the Aga Buryat Autonomous District (*Aginskii buryatskii avtonomnyi okrug*) merged with the Chita Region to form the Transbaikalian Province (*Zabaikal'skii krai*). Thus, the two Buryat territories outside the Republic of Buryatia (see Figure 1) lost their autonomy and became districts of Russian provinces (see Graber and Long 2009). These administrative reforms were negatively perceived by some Buryat villagers, who claimed that they were aimed at increasing regional economic statistics, as the neighbouring Russian districts were poorer than the Aga one. Above all, they saw as direct consequences a reduction in the budget allocated for the development of Buryat culture and the centralizing of the region's institutions in Chita, the capital of the new province, rather than in Aga.

## In the field

This book is the result of more than 20 months of cumulative fieldwork on both sides of the Mongolian-Russian border, where I made regular stays, of between one and three consecutive months, between 2008 and 2013. A return to both sides (in Aga in 2016, and in Mongolia in 2016 and



2018), gave me a glimpse of the most recent developments, mentioned in the conclusion.

In Mongolia, chance encounters led me to the province (*aimag*) of Arkhangai, in Central Mongolia (see general map in Figure 1), where I conducted most of my Mongolian fieldwork, characterized by a hilly steppe, and sometimes wooded, environment, depending on the district. It was in this province, more specifically in the Ikhtamir District (*sum*), that I crossed the path of the Joint Monaco-Mongolian Archaeological Mission in 2008,<sup>2</sup> which I worked with the following year in the Bayantsagaan Valley. I visited this valley four times, mostly within the framework of this mission, but often independently at the home of Ganzorig<sup>3</sup> (a herder) and his family, who lived at the Tsatsyn Ereg archaeological site. Ganzorig and his wife Mönkhchimeg, in their 50s at the time of the first survey, lived on the encampment with their newlywed son Chuluunbat and his wife Tuyaa (see Figure 5). My desire to spend time with camel herders then led me briefly to the Eastern Gobi (Dornogov' Province) in 2011, and in 2012 to Batbayar, a herder from the Gobi-Altai Province who had migrated to Arkhangai, in the Ölziit District, about 80 km from the Bayantsagaan Valley. Like Chuluunbat and his wife, Batbayar and his wife Erdenetsetseg – all born in the mid- to late 1980s – were my age, which facilitated my integration enormously. When I met them, they lived with Erdenetsetseg's maternal grandparents and had one son, Battulga, who was then two years old (see Figure 9). Both Ganzorig and Batbayar were relatively well-off herders, owning more than a thousand animals of all species. Participation in multidisciplinary projects, in the framework of the French archaeological missions,<sup>4</sup> allowed me to become familiar with other areas in the provinces of Bulgan and Bayan-Ölgii (in the Mongolian Altai), but this time as part of a team.

In Aga, Russia, I have always carried out my research alone, mostly in the sub-district (*raion*) of Mogoitui (in Zugalai), but also occasionally in the villages of Usharbai and Chelutai. In Mogoitui, I focused on three neighbouring pastoralist families with different statuses: Sogto and Dulma, in their 50s, are representative of absent herders (Gossiaux 2007) as they delegate the management of their farm to auxiliaries while they reside in the village, where their youngest son can attend school. Sogto and Dulma

2 Directed by Jérôme Magail, under the aegis of the Museum of Prehistoric Anthropology of Monaco and the Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

3 All names have been changed.

4 Directed by Sébastien Lepetz, in collaboration with Antoine Zazzo and Ts. Turbat, and financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, the CNRS, the National Museum of Natural History (Paris).



have several hundred sheep, a few dozen cattle and a handful of goats and horses; Bair and Sesegma, their neighbours, are in their 40s, and are typical 'kolkhozians' (*kolkhozniki*): employees of the cooperative and in charge of several hundred sheep, as well as their own sheep and dozens of cattle and horses, but no goats. Their children live in the city, where they work or study; and finally, Solbon and Dasha who are in their late 40s. They decided to set up as independent pastoralists in the mid-2000s and have no ties to the cooperative. Their livestock is larger than that of their neighbours: several hundred sheep and dozens of cattle and horses. Their two eldest children live in the village with their maternal grandparents, where they go to school, while their youngest, Galsan, who was two years old when I met him, lives with them on the station.

During my very first investigations, when my knowledge of the Mongolian and Buryat languages was limited, I favoured observation, informal conversations and photography. As my linguistic and technical skills increased, my observations became more and more participant; however, before I was allowed to perform practical tasks, I had to frequently show that I knew the related technical vocabulary. For example, even though I had explained that I was a horsewoman, I was not allowed to ride much during my first stay in Mongolia. It was only on my second visit, when I had mastered Mongolian horse vocabulary, that I was allowed to ride and then drive the herds. Initially I did simple tasks with the children – fetching water and wood, driving sheep and cattle – until I was gradually allowed to accompany the adults in their work – driving camels and horses in Mongolia, feeding lambs in Russia.

My status differed considerably from one family to another, with the length of time we had known each other playing a major role: in families where I stayed for only a few days, I was welcomed as a guest of honour and was rarely asked to help, even when I asked to do so, whereas in families where I stayed for at least a month, I was quickly assimilated into the family. In Aga, for example, Dasha gave me custody of her two-year-old son Galsan for several days while she was travelling. In the absence of any other women, I also took the place of mistress of the house for a while, having to prepare meals for the men on the farm and serve tea to passing guests.

Among the Mongolian herders, as with the Buryats, I preferred to take handwritten notes a posteriori, as it seemed to enable my hosts to talk more freely, especially about subjects that I did not intend to discuss and that the sight of a notebook could sometimes inhibit. However, most of the data I collected came from informal conversations during mealtimes, while washing dishes, preparing food, on the move (whether on horseback, by car



or by motorbike) or whilst carrying out pastoral tasks. In contrast, during meetings with local government officials, ritual specialists or politicians in Aga, I was expected to use a dictaphone or a notebook. Using these tools signified that I was a true 'ethnographer', the term used to refer to ethnologists in Russia. As the bonds of friendship with Mongolian and Buryat herders grew stronger and the purpose of my work became clearer to my hosts, I multiplied the techniques of recording information by taking photos, filming and equipping the cattle with GPS collars.<sup>5</sup>

I first used GPS in the summer of 2009, when I was asked, within the framework of the Joint Monaco-Mongolian Archaeological Mission, to record the positions of the herders' camps at the Tsatsyn Ereg archaeological site, in the Bayantsagaan Valley, in order to study the current occupancy of the surrounding area. But the discovery of the GPS 'tracer' function, which allows points to be recorded automatically at regular intervals while the GPS is in motion, was a revelation. The use of geolocalized data and the gradual understanding of this technical device gave access to a new type of information, impossible to obtain using conventional survey techniques: it offered the possibility to evaluate occupied surfaces, calculate the distances travelled, travel speeds, and analyze the movements of several individuals simultaneously. This last feature is particularly interesting, as it enables the study of Mongolian pastoralists who practice multispecies husbandry and whose livestock generally graze in at least four distinct herds; they would be impossible to follow simultaneously without this feature. Beyond providing access to additional information for ethnographic survey techniques, the use of GIS (Geographic Information System) offers new perspectives in terms of data restitution and representation of results.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, particular attention has been paid in this book to the cartographic representations of these data.

## The human-animal-environment triad

In the Western collective imagination the steppe is associated with monotony, isolation and loneliness – just look at Mongolia's population density, people say, it is the lowest in the world, less than two inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in 2015. But, actually, the steppe is relatively well-inhabited. The configuration of the landscape is influenced by the presence of rodents, wild herbivores

5 Mobile Action igot-U GT 600.

6 For initial methodological reflections, see Fossier and Marchina 2014.

and, above all, domestic herbivores – pastoralists' herds – who help shape the steppe landscape while maintaining its open character. Grazing herds maintain biodiversity (Endicott 2012: 93), and humans and animals mark the landscape by roaming and inhabiting the steppe. The steppe is therefore a highly anthropized environment.

The pastoral way of life involves humans and animals living together and being partly dependent on each other. This situation requires a reciprocal adaptation which, although present in all pastoralist populations, is more prevalent among nomadic herders who nomadize partly for their animals and whose animals, in turn, adapt to the routes designed by them, though these are often constrained by environmental conditions. The mutual adaptation of humans and animals in a nomadic pastoral context, particularly in its spatial dimensions, has been the subject of several studies among reindeer herders (Beach and Stammler 2006; Dwyer and Istomin 2008: 523; Fossier 2013; Istomin and Dwyer 2009; Stépanoff 2012; Stépanoff et al. 2017). These works highlight the complexity of interactions at play in the nomadic lifestyle and particularly in the feedback loops they generate. While ecological factors determine general patterns of movement, non-ecological factors determine certain parameters such as animal behaviour or human social structures. Nomadic pastoralism, therefore, far from being reduced to a simple relationship of human domination over animals, must be understood more as a complex system of multiple and perpetual interactions between herders and livestock.

As elsewhere in North Asia, Mongolian and Buryat herders grant a significant degree of autonomy to the animals in their pastoral methods, often leaving them to graze freely on open pastures. Herders and herds live in a mode of 'intermittent co-existence' (Stépanoff et al. 2017), with human-animal bonds that are generally relaxed depending on the season, the species or the animal's use. This mode of coexistence is made possible by the fact that pastoralists and herds evolve in a shared landscape, whose characteristics, resources and difficulties are known to both parties who have their bearings and habits there.

This book is not a complete monograph on nomadic pastoralism among Mongolian peoples.<sup>7</sup> Its aim is to focus on the spatial aspects of Mongolian nomadic pastoralism and present the features that underline the triadic aspect of the relationship at the heart of this system between humans, animals

7 A second book, in preparation, will be devoted to the more dyadic nature of the relationship between pastoralist herders and animals, particularly through multisensory communication and human-animal cooperation in daily pastoral tasks.

**Picture 2** Mongolia, Arkhangai Province

and the environment. It is an invitation to discover, on specific terrains, the complexity of the relationships that herders maintain with the lands they inhabit with their animals. In line with studies of ‘socioecological systems’, or integrated systems coupling nature and societies (Folke 2006), this book aims to approach Mongolian and Buryat pastoralism by taking into account the dynamic interaction between social and ecological systems. It examines the ways in which pastoralists and their animals inhabit their environment among Mongolian people and how space is occupied, invested or shared by, or between, different species. It also examines the links between these ways of inhabiting an environment, as well as the social relationships between herders and animals, and between humans and each another. By taking the reader on a journey to both sides of the Mongolian-Russian border, the book aims to show the elements of a Mongolian continuum, despite the fact that they are inscribed in different historical and political trajectories, and to question what politics does to this triadic human-animal-environment relationship. Finally, due to extremely rapid changes in these fields, both climatic and socio-economic, this book aims to capture this relationship at a specific point in time, before the rain, wind, migration, sedentarization, or simply time, changes it.