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# Energy for Tourists and for Pilgrims: Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre in Mongolia

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**Abstract:** In the last decades Khamaryn Khiid and the nearby Shambhala Energy Centre, a fast growing Buddhist monastic site in the remote Gobi desert, has become one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in today's Mongolia. The place draws Mongolian tourist-pilgrims who visit the monastery and adjacent sites as part of a family day-trip or longer holiday. Furthermore, the site has become attractive as a pilgrims' goal for a western clientele that aims to combine ecologically inspired tourism with a spiritual journey. Based on recent fieldwork, the article examines the interplay of religion and tourism in the development of this global pilgrimage destination.

**Keywords:** religious tourism, pilgrimage, Mongolia, Khamaryn Khiid, Shambhala Energy Centre

## 1 Introduction

[...] the pilgrims who now visit here have many different aims: they just look around, or many pray, or they arrange for the reading of *sūtras*, they participate in different activities, they get relieve of the seeds<sup>1</sup> of their deeds, others want to cleanse their thoughts, their mind and their emotions, some obtain strength, so they come with different intentions, and afterwards they return with wonderful feelings.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here the karmic seeds are meant. According to the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of *karma*, our intentional actions create karmic impressions, “seeds”, in our mind. These seeds will later come to fruition, compare Harvey 1990: 39–40.

<sup>2</sup> From the interview with the nun Cécénsajkhan (No. DS500017) in Khamaryn Khiid.

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Khamaryn Khiid<sup>3</sup> and the nearby Shambhala Energy Centre, a fast growing Buddhist monastic site in the remote Gobi desert some 38 kilometres south of the city of Sainshand, is not easy to reach, yet in the last two decades it has become one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in today's Mongolia, attracting Mongolian and foreign visitors alike. The popularity of this site has been fuelled by the revival of Mongolian Buddhism since the early nineties of the twentieth century and the growing interest of Western tourists in “power spots” on the global map of spiritually potent places. As implied in the quotation, the pilgrimage to Khamaryn Khiid arises from a multiplicity of motives. People visit the place for touristic purposes and relaxation, to cope with personal mundane concerns like university entry exams or the physical cure of ailments, or to get spiritual assistance in regard to their individual karmic afflictions. Such multiple, mutually not exclusive reasons to go on pilgrimage to Khamaryn Khiid are not a new phenomenon. The motivations behind pilgrimages have always been manifold, as studies about the history of pilgrimage in different parts of the world confirm.<sup>4</sup> The close connection between pilgrimage and entertainment which can be observed in today's pilgrimage sites<sup>5</sup> is also attested for pilgrimage sites of earlier eras. Although the terms “tourism” and “tourist” have been coined relatively late, in the nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> the phenomenon itself is much older. As Ian Reader maintains,

[T]he origins of the tourist trade are closely associated with pilgrimage, for it is generally considered that the earliest package tours were developed in the medieval era, when overland pilgrimage routes to the Christian Holy Land had become fraught with danger. [...] During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Holy Land pilgrimage trade was so beneficial to the Venetian economy that city authorities established a tourist office to aid pilgrims [...].<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Khalkh-Mongolian is transliterated according to Vietze 1978 with the exception of *x* which is transliterated as *kh*. For the convenience of the general reader popularised renderings of Mongolian place names are retained. The transcription of the Uiguro-Mongolian script follows Poppe 2006, with the exception of *j* which is written without haček, and the diphthongs *ai*, *ei*, *oi*, and *ui* which are written without diacritical marks. The Tibetan script is transliterated according to the Wylie-system, Sanskrit according to the internationally accepted rules.

<sup>4</sup> Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* provide a good example for this multiplicity. Other examples are Japan (Reader 1987, 2005), Santiago de Compostela (Herbers 2007) or Jerusalem (Chareyron 2000).

<sup>5</sup> On one evening in July 2016, the entrance to the *ger camp* opposite to Khamaryn Khiid was garishly illuminated by party lights and loud party music was playing. As I did not stay in that place, I do not know what kind of festivity was going on.

<sup>6</sup> Stausberg 2010: 14–15.

<sup>7</sup> Reader 2015: 16.

While tourism has been a vital part of the pilgrimage historically, it is particularly powerful in contemporary pilgrimage dynamics. In the last decades I encountered the interplay of pilgrimage and tourism in many different locations, in the Indian pilgrimage cities of Hardwar and Rishikesh, at the ancient Buddhist sites of Sanchi, Bodhgaya and Sarnath as well as in the cathedral of Trondheim in Norway which had once been the northernmost destination of a catholic pilgrim's way. From the perspective of a global history of pilgrimage, Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre is a "newcomer", because only in recent years it has become attractive as a pilgrims' goal for a Western clientele that aims to combine ecologically inspired tourism with a spiritual journey. At the same time, the site increasingly draws Mongolian tourist-pilgrims who visit the monastery and adjacent sites as part of a family day-trip or longer holiday. My interest lies in this revival of pilgrimage in today's Mongolia in which issues of religion and spiritual tourism are engaged and negotiated. To study contemporary forms of both Mongolian pilgrimage and spiritual tourism from abroad, in 2016 I conducted a first exploratory fieldwork with my Mongolian colleague Mungunchimeg Batmunkh in Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre in Dornogovi Aimag. In addition to field data, I also drew on internet sources and grey literature, mostly from tourist companies. In this paper I present the first, preliminary results of my research.

Before I present the case study about Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre in Dornogovi Aimag, I will put the contemporary pilgrimage in Mongolia in its historical context. To this aim, I will shortly address specific Mongolian notions of pilgrimage and pilgrimage places, then introduce the reader to the available textual sources and provide a rough overview about the current state of research. Finally, in the discussion of my findings I will not so much focus on the structural affinities between religion and tourism, but will rather concentrate on the entangled cultural, social and material realities of pilgrimage and tourism in contemporary Mongolia.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Pilgrims, pilgrimage and pilgrimage sites in the Mongolian regions

The Inner-Mongolian Encyclopedia of Religion *Šasin-u toli/Chos lugs kyi tshig mdzod* gives the following definition of "pilgrim" under the entry "mörgölčin": "Believers who have come to temples and monasteries in order to worship. Pilgrims are the

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<sup>8</sup> Stausberg 2011: 2.

main people who provide for the temples and monasteries through economic offerings. On the religious side, they are called donor (Dānapati, sbyin bdag).”<sup>9</sup> This short definition includes three important aspects which characterize pilgrimage in the Mongolian and Tibetan cultural regions: Firstly, a pilgrim is a person who travels, and secondly he or she does so in order to “perform acts of meaningful significance such as praying and performing rituals”, as Ian Reader points out in his definition of a pilgrim.<sup>10</sup> These two aspects are also valid in a global perspective of pilgrimage. Thirdly, Sutubilig stresses the economic aspect which is of utmost importance for the functioning of Buddhist temples and monasteries in the Tibeto-Mongolian cultural regions. In this respect, pilgrimage has a different value and importance in the Buddhist world than in the Christian cultural sphere. Ideally, the Buddhist *Sangha* is conceived as a community of individuals who have abandoned all attachment to the world and worldly duties in their pursuit of religious attainment. They follow a life which ideally does not permit work, and therefore have to rely on the material support of the lay community which acts as donor. In Tibet and Mongolia this reciprocal relationship was institutionalised in the twofold model of *yon mchod*, donor/alms-giver (*yon bdag* or *sbyin bdag*; Mo. *öglige-yin ejen*) and donee/alms-receiver (*mchod gnas*; Mo. *takil-un oron*).<sup>11</sup> In the reciprocal Buddhist system which constitutes a Buddhist community, a pilgrim acquires the role of donor who contributes significantly to the income of a monastery or its individual inmates.<sup>12</sup> In former times, pilgrims would offer contributions to the monasteries mostly during temple fairs<sup>13</sup> and daily ritual services. If they were rich, they would contribute land and cattle, and, among other things, money, grain, tea, cloth, and precious metals.<sup>14</sup> These contributions would be given to a specific treasury (Mo. *jisa*)<sup>15</sup> or for a specific service. They could also be divided among the monks.<sup>16</sup> However, because of this division such income was difficult to assess statistically.

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<sup>9</sup> Sutubilig 1996: 240.

<sup>10</sup> Reader 2015: 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ruegg 1995.

<sup>12</sup> In Mongolian and Tibetan monasteries monks were not supported by the monastery but received customary distributions of food, usually during the daily ritual service, and also cash at certain periods. Sometimes lay donors financed non-customary distributions for all monks, and sometimes individual monks profited from donations through the performance of specially required ritual services. For the Mongolian Buddhist monastic economy see Miller 1961; Murphy 1961.

<sup>13</sup> Lessing 1935: 169–179.

<sup>14</sup> Miller 1959: 106.

<sup>15</sup> Miller 1961.

<sup>16</sup> This division of contributions is still customary in Tibetan monasteries. I was witness and receiving party of one such contribution during my two-year-stay (1984–1986) in a Tibetan monastery in Northern India (Uttarakhand).

Pilgrimage in the Mongolian cultural regions is an embodied practice, as is denoted in the use of the term *mörgölčîn*. *Mörgölčîn* derives from the deverbal noun *mörgöl*. As already explained elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> *mörgöl* denotes the “act of bowing”, stressing the bodily performance of veneration. The wider semantic field connects to the pastoral background of this Mongolian second-order conceptualization: *mörgöl* derives from the verb *mörgö-*, literally “to butt (of animals)”. It refers to the cattle butting their horns.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, *mörgö-* is used to denote respectful greeting in a broader venerational context. *Mörgöl* then refers to a special way of greeting in Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist culture, when a lama greets a fellow lama, a monk or a high-ranking lay person softly butting his forehead to the other person’s forehead. The gesture can also be performed to honour somebody. The notion of movement in the concept of pilgrimage is expressed by the verbs *yabu-* (Khalkh-Mo. *javakh*) or *ayala-* (Khalkh-Mo. *ajalakh*), thus *mörgöl-dür yabu-* “to go on pilgrimage”, *mörgölijn ajalal* (Khalkh-Mo.),<sup>19</sup> “pilgrimage”. Thus, in the term and the concept of *mörgöl* the visible and performative aspects of the Mongolian embodied conceptualisation of pilgrimage are expressed.<sup>20</sup>

The Mongolian term for pilgrimage place, *adistid-un oron* or *adistidlaysan oron*,<sup>21</sup> is closely connected to the Tibetan concept of *gnas*<sup>22</sup> through the notion of empowerment or sacred energy.<sup>23</sup> The Mongolian *adistid* (derived from the Sanskrit *adiṣṭhāna*) translates the Tibetan *byin rlabs*. An “empowered place, place of empowerment”, can be the abode of a deity or the residence of an “emanation body” (Mo. *qubilyan*; Tib. *sprul sku*), or a place where specific tantric rituals of deity yoga are performed. They are loaded with sacred energy which is conducive to remove the pollutions (Tib. *sgrib*) and moral defilements (Tib. *sdig pa*) that accumulate in the human body. By virtue of their *adistid*, pilgrimage places convey the power to cleanse these embodied pollutions and defilements. Therefore the pilgrim has to get into physical contact with the energy-loaded substance of the pilgrimage place, and she or he does so by performing prostrations and circumambulations.

However, the outward motivation to go on pilgrimage is to accumulate merit (Mo. *buyan*; Tib. *bsod nams*) and, in a more secular perspective, to ensure good

<sup>17</sup> Kollmar-Paulenz 2012: 14.

<sup>18</sup> Charleux 2015: 23, quoting the French scholar Roberte Hamayon, also draws a connection to a specific gesture of the shaman.

<sup>19</sup> Interview No. DS 500012.

<sup>20</sup> Kollmar-Paulenz 2012: 14. This is also pointed out by Charleux 2015: 23.

<sup>21</sup> Charleux 2015: 24–25, additionally mentions terms like *orošiysan oron*.

<sup>22</sup> Huber 1999: 13–14.

<sup>23</sup> Huber 1999: 15.

luck (Khalkh-Mo. *az*), fortune (Khalkh-Mo. *chiimori*)<sup>24</sup> and prosperity. In pilgrimage, as elsewhere, the pragmatic and the religious sphere are interwoven.

There are numerous pilgrimage places in Mongolia, including natural sites like large rocks and mountains.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that these different pilgrimage places in the past addressed different audiences who brought with them their specific needs and goals. Lay-people eager to ensure worldly goods or health, fertility and prosperity in this life, went to sites in their immediate vicinity that were easily accessible. Unfortunately, such short distance pilgrimages which must have been undertaken very often are rarely documented. Trans-regional pilgrimages to Urga, Wutaishan, Kumbum, Labrang, Lhasa or even as far as Bodnath in India were undertaken by lay-people and monks alike. The fact that merchants often combined long-distance trade with pilgrimage suggests multiple motives behind such journeys, and at the entanglement of commerce and religion. Long-distance pilgrimage to the famous Tibetan places loaded with sacred power or energy (*adistid/byin rlabs*) considerably added to the social prestige, or in the words of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the *social capital* of the returning pilgrims. Furthermore, pilgrimage was (and still is) gender-sensitive. Some places are forbidden for women, some places men are reluctant to visit. We will see that the gender issue also plays a role in the pilgrimage to Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre.

### 3 Pilgrimage sites in Mongolia: The sources

Whereas research about pilgrimage sites in Tibet and the adjacent Himalayan regions is abundant,<sup>26</sup> less has been done in this research field with regard to Mongolia. As the French scholar Isabelle Charleux in her recent seminal work on the pilgrimage site of mount Wutaishan in China rightly asserts: “[...] no book has yet been written on Mongol pilgrimages.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, her monograph about Mongolian pilgrimage to Wutaishan is the first and only significant contribution to this as yet mostly unexplored research field. One possible reason for this curious lacuna may lie in the fact that, as Charleux points out, “Mongol

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<sup>24</sup> Swancutt 2012: 102–105.

<sup>25</sup> Charleux 2015: 28–61, gives a comprehensive overview of the different Mongolian pilgrimage sites.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, McKay 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Charleux 2015: 22.

pilgrimage guides are rare and difficult to obtain compared to Tibetan guidebooks.”<sup>28</sup> In the Tibetan cultural regions guidebooks for pilgrims exist in abundance, for large and small places alike.<sup>29</sup> Even local pilgrimage places often have their own *gnas yig*, “guide to a holy place” and *lam yig*, “travel-guide” which usually goes into the history of the site.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the so called *dkar chag* (“table of content”) give much valuable information about pilgrimage places, telling the history of a specific site and giving detailed lists of its holy objects.<sup>31</sup> These different Tibetan generic categories often overlap.<sup>32</sup> The texts are fairly stereotypical and standardized with regard to the topics addressed and the narratives used to describe them. Although since the early seventeenth century Mongolian literature has been deeply influenced by Tibetan literature, the Mongols apparently did not pick up the Tibetans’ love for guidebooks to their holy places. Historical sources about pilgrimage sites in the Mongolian territories, written in the Mongolian language, are indeed scarce.<sup>33</sup> Among the extant texts we find a history of Buddhism in the Khalkha lands with particular reference to the Erdeni Zuu monastery<sup>34</sup> and a history of Erdeni Zuu, written in the first part of the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> These two texts pay due respect to the importance of Erdeni Zuu, the most popular pilgrimage place of the Khalkha territory in the Qing period, as the Russian scholar and ethnographer Aleksei Pozdneev noted during his travels in the region.<sup>36</sup> Ārya paṇḍita mkhan po, the author of the famous Mongolian chronicle *Altan Erike*, composed a detailed description of the establishment of the *Oron-u degedü buyan бүкүн-i*

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28 Charleux 2015: 22.

29 Buffetrille 2000: 3–10 gives an overview of the guidebooks and critically discusses them, stressing their twofold nature with regard to their presentation of the pilgrim’s journey. The landmarks of the journey are at the same time real and symbolically loaded. On the one hand they unfold an inner vision which the pilgrim experiences in and through the landscape, on the other hand the guidebooks are often surprisingly clear in describing actual pilgrimage routes. Compare for example the guidebooks to *Ti se* and *La phyi* (De Rossi Filibeck 1988).

30 See for example Kind 2012: Annex 2.

31 Martin 1996. For a translation of one such *dkar chag* see Baradijn 1924.

32 For a critical appraisal of these texts building a distinct literary genre see Buffetrille 2000: 8.

33 Interestingly, this scarcity of sources does not include Mongolian pilgrimage to sites outside Mongolia, like the Wutaishan, see Charleux 2015. Apart from this famous mountain, in various libraries we find pilgrims’ guidebooks to places like the Bodnath Stūpa in Nepal, the *sPrul ba’i lha khang* in Lhasa, or the Sandalwood Buddha in Beijing.

34 *Qalq-a mongyol-un oron-du angq-a burqan šajin eki oluysan töröl teüke: basa yeke adistid-tu sitügen erdeni juu-yin bütügeküi yeke tuyuji orosibai*. This text is preserved in Saint-Petersburg, see Uspensky 1999: 282, no. 257.

35 Tsendina 1999.

36 Pozdneev 1896.

*čuyларыулуычи keyid* in the Khalkha territory,<sup>37</sup> and a guidebook about yet another monastery in the Khalkha region.<sup>38</sup> The famous Mergen diyanči Lubsang Dambijalsan (1717–1766) wrote a guidebook about his monastery.<sup>39</sup> Mention should also be made of the towering work *Erdeni-yin Erike*, a chronicle about the monastic sites in all Mongolia, composed by the monk Isibaldan in 1835.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the stone inscriptions erected at the site of Buddhist monasteries in Mongolia often provide valuable historical information. The custom of erecting stone inscriptions commemorating the donors of monastic sites reaches back to the early years of the Mongolian buddhisization in the late sixteenth, early seventeenth centuries. The known stone inscriptions include, among others, the well-studied inscriptions of Čoytu Tayiji dating from 1612, 1617 and 1624,<sup>41</sup> and the inscription of Majay Qatun of 1606.<sup>42</sup>

Apart from the scarce material in the Mongolian language, there are some guidebooks about Mongolian monastic pilgrimage places written in the Tibetan language and included in the *gSung `bum* (collected works) of renowned Mongolian and Tibetan lamas. To mention but a few: the lCang lung paṇḍita Ngag dbang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (eighteenth century) composed two guidebooks about the two *Lha sa Jo bo* statues in his home monastery bSod nams kun sdud gling,<sup>43</sup> and a guide to the temple itself.<sup>44</sup> The monastery was situated in the Abay-a banner of the Shilingool league. Further, the collected works of Blo bzang shes rab nyi ma contain a description of the Inner Mongolian monastery bKra shis chos `khor gling<sup>45</sup> which the author composed in 1805.<sup>46</sup> In the collected works of the VII Dalai Lama Blo bzang skal bzang rgya mtsho (1708–1757) we find a work about the monastery sDe mkhas grub gling in the

37 Farquhar 1955: 196, no. 30; Heissig 1961: IX.

38 Heissig 1961: IX, note 49.

39 *Mergen süm-e-yin gcang-gang-un dgarčay kemekü orosiba*. The work is included in his Collected Works, see Uspensky 1999: 115, no. 138/14.

40 Heissig 1961.

41 Vladimirtsov 1926, 1927.

42 Serruys 1958. For Mongolian stone inscriptions of monasteries see also Laufer/Franke 1914; Huth 1894; Heissig 1955; Heissig 1966.

43 *gNas mchog bsod nams kun sdud gling gi rten gtso jo bo ma hā bo ddhi'i dkar chag ched du brjod pa dvangs shel me long*, and *Jo bo mi bskyod rdo rje srid zhi'i `jigs skyob ma'i snang brnyan gsar bzhengs kyi dkar chag bkra shis tshangs dbyangs*, see Chandra 1963: 2, s.v. lCang lung paṇḍita.

44 *gNas mchog bsod nams kun sdud gling gi dkar chag ka la pingga'i (?) glu dbyangs*, see Chandra 1963: 2, s.v. lCang lung paṇḍita.

45 *Chos sde chen po bkra shis chos `khor gling gi rten brten par bcas pa bskor ba'i tshul gsal bar brjod pa dge legs rin chen `dren pa'i shing rta*.

46 Taube 1966 4: 1061, no. 2878.

Khalkha territory.<sup>47</sup> The *mKhan chen* of Ikh Khüree, Ngag dbang [blo bzang] mkhas grub, also known under the title of Kyai rdor gyi mkhan po (1779–1838), published a guide to the grand statue of Maitreya at Ikh Khürèè.<sup>48</sup>

The trans-regional pilgrimage place of Wutaishan is well documented with regard to the sociological and economic aspects of pilgrimage, as Isabelle Charleux has shown in her wonderful monograph about the mountain.<sup>49</sup> She was able to draw on the numerous stone inscriptions erected at Wutaishan over the centuries. Local pilgrimage places within Mongolia most often lack such sources, and the few Mongolian and Tibetan guidebooks are mostly silent about issues that have to do with the market-place aspects of these places. Therefore the “interweaving of the market and the sacred”<sup>50</sup> is a blank spot in the texts. Furthermore, the pilgrims themselves do not appear in these works. We do not get to know who actually visits the sites (with the exception of high Buddhist dignitaries whose visits would be noted and exploited to increase the social and religious prestige of the site), monks and/or lay people of what social strata, what individual, spiritual motives, but also commercial needs motivated them, why and to what end they were attracted to a specific place and also why such an attraction sometimes ended and contributed to the decline of a pilgrimage place. To all these issues our sources provide only very limited or no answers at all.<sup>51</sup>

There is one yet unexplored angle which might prove fruitful for future research: Klaus Sagaster, professor emeritus of Bonn University, suggested to me that there may be some relevant material documenting the flows of pilgrims and the market aspect of these sites in the regional archives of *sum* and *aimag* centres.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Isabelle Charleux has examined passports for groups of pilgrims which were needed to cross the banner borders. Such material is nowadays preserved in the National Archives of Mongolia and the Provincial Archives of Inner Mongolia.<sup>53</sup>

In more recent times, the period from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the twentieth century, ethnographical accounts of Western travellers prove useful

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47 Taube 1966 4: 1062, no. 2881: *Khal kha'i dgon sde mkhas grub gling gi skor tshad*.

48 *Khu re chen mor bzhengs pa'i byams pa'i sku brnyan gyi dkar chag*, in his *gSung 'bum*, vol. ka, see Lokesh Chandra 1963: 2, s.v. Ngag dbang blo bzang mkhas grub.

49 Charleux 2015: 205–276.

50 Reader 2016: 15.

51 For Buryatia, however, the situation is different. Buryat lamas and lay people who went for pilgrimage to Lhasa have written individual travel accounts (see Sazykin 1988 I: 295–296; Tsyrempilov/Vanchikova 2004: 164–165). The same applies to Kalmyk pilgrims who left behind diaries (Tsybikov 1903; Bormanshinov 1998).

52 Personal communication, 11.06.2016.

53 Charleux 2015: 15.

to fill the information gap.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, these travel reports often document the pilgrims' rituals and practices about which we do not get much information in the Mongolian and Tibetan sources, attesting the importance of market engagement in the context of pilgrimages and clearly showing that the separation of the religious and the secular for the sake of analysis is not only impractical, but methodologically doubtful. Thus, the missionary James Gilmour who travelled in Mongolia in the latter half of the nineteenth century, pointedly observes about Mongolian pilgrims in Beijing: "Very seldom does a Mongol come to Peking on only one errand. [...] In most cases those who come to worship take the opportunity to do a stroke of trade, and those who come to trade do not neglect to make the round of the temples when their secular business is finished. Government duty find [!] opportunities for both traffic and devotion".<sup>55</sup>

## 4 Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre in Dornogovi Aimag: Past and present

In the context of the revival of Buddhism in the 1990s, old pilgrimage sites were revived and new ones were established. Probably the most popular pilgrimage place in today's Mongolia is the Khamaryn Khiid in Dornogovi Aimag, particularly the so called "Shambhala Energy Centre" that builds part of the sacred landscape around the monastery. Charleux even maintains that "Khamar-un Kheid and its Shambhala mythology has now replaced Wutaishan for many pilgrims of the Republic of Mongolia".<sup>56</sup> Be that as it may, the site is certainly very attractive for Mongolian and foreign visitors alike, as I could observe during a stay in July 2013 and more recently during field work in July 2016.

The *Övör bayasqulang-tu Qamar* (Khalkh-Mo. *Övör bjasgalant khamar*)<sup>57</sup> monastery, in short Khamaryn Khiid, was founded in 1821<sup>58</sup> by the famous and still immensely popular Fifth Noyon Khutagt Danjinrabjai/Danzan Ravjaa (Tib.

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54 Pozdneev 1896 is still probably the richest source with regard to every-day life of Mongolian monks and lay Buddhists at the eve of the twentieth century. Other travel reports include Timkowski 1825–1826; Huc 1986 (1855), or Lessing 1935.

55 Gilmour 1883: 357–358.

56 Charleux 2015: 383.

57 The popular rendering is *Övör bayasgalant khamar*.

58 Tsédэндamba 2009: 376; Kohn (2009: 66) maintains that the monastery was commissioned in 1820. The present Khamba lama also mentions the date 1821 (Interview No. DS500016). Altangerel/Khatanbaatar 2009: 11 stress that the founding year was 1818.

bsTan `dzin rab rgyas) (1803–1857).<sup>59</sup> According to the Mongolian scholar Tsédéndamba it had been a large monastic complex.<sup>60</sup> In its heyday it consisted of four main quarters, Züün and Baruun Khürée, Cokhon and Dujnchor. The Züün Khürée housed the Lavrijn temple and the library which was accessible to monks and lay-people alike.<sup>61</sup> A childrens' school offered training for local children. In Züün Khürée the remains of the Fourth Noyon Khutagt were preserved at a specially erected temple, and later also the Sixth Noyon Khutagt was interred in Züün Khürée.<sup>62</sup> Baruun Khürée housed the temple museum called *Givadin Ravžaalín* which was installed by Danzan Ravjaa in 1842.<sup>63</sup> A special "Story-singing college" (Khalkh-Mo. *Namtar duulakh dacan*) was built in the 1830s. Khamaryn Khiid had fifteen treasuries (*jisa*) and more than eighty temples. It housed more than 500 monks.<sup>64</sup> Today the monastery consists of one Yellow (= dGe lugs pa) temple, one Red (= bKa' brgyud pa)<sup>65</sup> temple, an homage to Danzan Ravjaa's impartial religious inclinations (Figure 1), and, as most recent addition, a nun's temple (Figure 2). The red temple houses the famous thousand-knife-statue of Padmasambhava (Mo. *tümen mese-yin burqan*, Khalkh-Mo. *tümen mesny burkhan*) which was allegedly built by Danzan Ravjaa himself.<sup>66</sup> The pilgrimage complex also includes natural sites: To the north of the monastery lie thirteen caves which in former times were used by monks who went into retreat or opted for a prolonged meditation period. Approximately 23 kilometres southwest of Khamaryn Khiid is the Bayanzurkh<sup>67</sup> Uul which is considered to be the home of the spirit of the Third Noyon Khutagt. To the north of the monastery lies the site of the two "breast *oboo*". The landscape and the access to its ritual space are highly gendered. Men are allowed on the top of Bayanzurkh mountain, whereas women are not allowed beyond the *oboo* which is erected halfway to the top.<sup>68</sup> A few steps down a small pavilion offers protection against the weather for the women who wait here for their menfolk

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59 On him see Khürélbaatar 1996: 126–197; Sardar 2007. Sardar relies on the short autobiography of Danzan Ravjaa. For a survey of his literary oeuvre see Heissig 1994: 185–240. On the incarnation lineage of the Noyan Qutuytus see Mendsajkhan et al. 2013.

60 Tsédéndamba 2009: 376.

61 Kohn 2009: 161 gives a short description of its functioning.

62 Kohn 2009: 68.

63 Tsédéndamba 2009: 376; Kohn 2009: 159–161.

64 Tsédéndamba 2009: 376.

65 Oral information provided by the abbot of Khamaryn Khiid.

66 For the legend about this statue see Altangerel/Khatanbaatar 2009: 55.

67 I follow here the popular Latin transliteration.

68 In Tibet the mountain cult is intimately connected to gendered conceptions of the body, both for social and religious reasons, see Huber 1994; 1999: 120. Similar gender restrictions apply to the Mongolian *oboo* ritual. One important reason that women are often not allowed to



Figure 1: The yellow and red temple.



Figure 2: Inside the nun's temple.

to return from the mountain top. The Mongolian pilgrims I talked to considered Bayanzurkh Uul to be a ritual site catering to specifically male spiritual (and mundane) needs.<sup>69</sup> The *Tontoon oboo* on the north side of Khamaryn Khiid builds its female equivalent. The *tontoon* or *mèem oboo*, two *oboo* modelled after female breasts draw a lot of female pilgrims (Figure 3). As local lore recounts, these *oboo* have been built by Danzan Ravjaa himself. When I visited the place in July 2013, Mongolian women told me that this is a site particularly for women's needs like wishes for fertility or health, and men should not circumambulate the *oboo*. However, I also saw men doing the circumambulation,<sup>70</sup> and apparently there exists another rule that says that men are allowed to circumambulate the *oboo* after the women.<sup>71</sup> While circling the *oboo*, the female pilgrims toss milk offerings onto them. There is also a womb cave nearby, through which pilgrims crawl.<sup>72</sup> Asked about their motives to perform the ritual, pilgrims specified that in this way they get rid of their karmic pollutions, opting for a better rebirth in the next life. Here, the journey is two-fold, physical as well as metaphorical, and the pilgrims' movements have real and symbolic meanings.

Khamaryn Khiid was destroyed in the thirties of the twentieth century during Chojbalsan's purges. However, before the demolition of the monastery the *takhilč* (steward) Tudév managed to hide most of Danzan Ravjaa's library, packed away in 45 boxes, in the nearby mountains.<sup>73</sup> In 1992, Tudév's grandson Altangérél exhumed 23 boxes, and established a small museum in Sainshand in which these treasures are now housed.<sup>74</sup> In the 1990s the whole site was restored, with the help and financial funds of Mongolia's former Minister of Defense, Sharavdorj, who had converted to the rNying ma-school of Tibetan

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participate in an *oboo* ritual on a mountain summit is the fact that women do not belong to the patriarchal group which forms a cognate relationship with the mountain (Humphrey 2003: 148).

**69** Without, however, specifying what they consider to be male spiritual needs.

**70** Lucy Thompson in her article about Khamaryn Khiid observed the same, see [www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center.html](http://www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center.html) (last accessed 17.11.2017).

**71** However, Altangérél, the *takhilč* of the Noyon Khutagt heritage, insists that men are forbidden to circumambulate the *oboo* (personal communication, 26.06.2016).

**72** Charleux 2015: 359–367 discusses the ritual of the womb cave in the wider context of Inner Asian religious concepts and practices; compare also Humphrey 2003: 149–150. For a general overview about womb caves in Asia see Stein 1988.

**73** Sardar 2007: 258. The number of boxes varies in the accounts. According to the British Library website ([www.eap.bl.uk/project/EAPO31](http://www.eap.bl.uk/project/EAPO31), accessed 17.11.2017) 24 crates have been unburied and 22 crates still remain in the earth. Another website mentions 40 unburied crates and 24 boxes which have been left in the earth ([www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_pictures/8187628.stm](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_pictures/8187628.stm), last accessed 17.11.2017).

**74** For Danzan Ravjaa's literary heritage see [www.eap.bl.uk/project/EAPO31](http://www.eap.bl.uk/project/EAPO31).



Figure 3: The “breast oboo”.

Buddhism.<sup>75</sup> Not far from the temple complex, some two to three kilometres to the north-east, a site dedicated to the realm of Shambhala was built. The site in the form of a *maṇḍala* is surrounded by 108<sup>76</sup> stūpas (Figure 4). Danzan Ravjaa had a special affinity to the mythical realm of Shambhala that is closely connected to the *Kālacakra tantra*.<sup>77</sup> According to this tantra and other Tibetan sources<sup>78</sup> the mythical country of Shambhala lies somewhere north of the Himalayas and north of the mythical river Sitā. The country has the form of an eight-petalled lotus, which is surrounded by two ranges of snow-mountains. According to Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist tradition, in Shambhala no evil is known, its people are naturally virtuous and good. Most of them obtain Buddhahood during their lifespan in Shambhala. Once somebody is born in this realm, he will never be reborn into a lower form of existence. This description shows close affinities to Buddhist concepts like the Buddha fields of

75 Wallace 2008: 50.

76 The number should not be taken literally.

77 Newman 1985; Kollmar-Paulenz 1992–3.

78 For an overview of available sources see Kollmar-Paulenz 1992–3: 88–96.



Figure 4: The Shambhala Energy Centre.

*Sukhāvātī* or *Potala*, but in one important aspect Shambhala differs from them. It includes an apocalyptic vision of a future battle between the last *kalki* of Shambhala, Raudracakrin, and the ruler of the infidels (Tib. *kla klo*, Mo. *lalo*).<sup>79</sup> One of the earliest Tibetan texts to deal with the kingdom of Shambhala, the *sDom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba* of the Sa skya paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251), describes the battle and its outcome thus:

At the time of the degeneration [of the *dharma*], *Āryadeśa*<sup>80</sup> will be filled with the religion of the infidels. Then by the magic power of the infidels an army will be conducted to Shambhala. At that time the king named Drag po, the apparition-body of Phyag na rdo rje,<sup>81</sup> will conquer all the infidels. Thereafter even in the middle of *Āryadeśa* the teaching of the Buddha will be spread.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Sanskrit *mleccha*. For a discussion of the *kla klo/lalo* that in the *Kālacakra tantra* and the *Vimalaprabhā* are synonymous with the Muslims, see Hoffmann 1969, 1971–2. In later sources the term *kla klo/ lalo* is mostly used to denote non-Buddhists in general.

<sup>80</sup> The Indian subcontinent, in this context denoting the whole known world.

<sup>81</sup> Mo. *Očirvani*.

<sup>82</sup> Sa skya paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan 1968: 32v.

According to his autobiography, Danzan Ravjaa was fascinated by this Buddhist apocalyptic vision and, in an entry for the year 1830, maintained that “in the future, when the Panchen Lama reigns as the king of Shambhala, when many enlightened Buddhas, commanders and officials are waging battle against the *mlecchas*, I received a prophecy that I will [reincarnate] as the commander Sanjay Dorje Gyalpo and take under my command the soldiers and officers of the outer, inner and secret [places].”<sup>83</sup> In his monumental *History of Mongolian Literature*, the German mongolist Walther Heissig maintains that in the same year 1830 Danzan Ravjaa took part in a *Tsam*-performance “Battle of Shambhala” (*Šambala-yin dayin*) that was based on the famous account of the Third Panchen Lama Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes (1737–1780).<sup>84</sup> Danzan Ravjaa played one of the *chos skyong*, the “guardians of the *dharma*.”<sup>85</sup> Heissig drew on his biography *Tabuduyar noyan qutuytu-yin teüke namtar-un sudur*<sup>86</sup> which is unavailable to me at the time of writing this paper. I could not find any independent proof for this *Tsam*-performance, and I also could not find any reference to a *Tsam* that centres around the Shambhala myth.<sup>87</sup> When asked about the *Šambala-yin dayin*, the *takhilč* Altangérèl explained that “in the play *Saran khökhöö* there was one scene which was about the Shambhala-war.”<sup>88</sup>

The present Khamba lama of Khamaryn Khiid provides the years 1830 and 1832 for the construction of the original site.<sup>89</sup> According to his autobiography, in 1853 Danzan Ravjaa “opened” the path to Shambhala,<sup>90</sup> whatever this vague phrase implies. A booklet written by Altangérèl and Khatanbaatar suggests that not Danzan Ravjaa but his disciples built the Shambhala site:

In 1851, the Fifth Khalkha Noyon Khutugt Luvsan Danzan Ravjaa let all his disciples gather amidst the multi-colored hills located near Khamar Monastery, made proportional drawings for his Shambhala, and made a dedication prayer to meet with his disciples in the holy land of Shambhala. Later, disciples of Khamar Monastery transformed it into a meditation practice land with wooden stupas, entrance gates, an ovoo etc. This is our base for rebuilding the Shambhala of Khamar Monastery, today.<sup>91</sup>

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83 Sardar 2007: 282.

84 Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes, Third Panchen Lama (no date). I used the microfilm of a manuscript preserved in Budapest, compare also Kollmar-Paulenz 1992–3: 92, n. 71.

85 Heissig 1994: 195.

86 Heissig 1994: 187 and 222, note 16.

87 See also Kollmar-Paulenz/Batmunkh 2015: 641–642.

88 Interview with Altangérèl, 26.07.2016.

89 Interview No. DS500016.

90 Sardar 2007: 288.

91 Altangerel/Khatanbaatar 2009: 46.

Furthermore, Konchog Norbu, a Buddhist monk of *Kunzang Palyul Chöling* in Ulanbaatar, received the information from Altangerel that “the reconstruction of the site is an exact replica of Danzan Ravjaa’s original layout, using updated building materials. It was designed to be used by pilgrims as a symbolic entry into Shambhala and to create the causes for their actual rebirth there in the future.”<sup>92</sup> I myself was not able to locate any reference to a Shambhala temple or *stūpa* going back to Danzan Ravjaa’s times in the Tibetan and Mongolian historical texts available to me.

According to the American scholar Vesna Wallace, the Shambhala monument in the Gobi at Khamaryn Khiid is believed to “be situated exactly below the Pure Land of Sukhavati.”<sup>93</sup> Apparently she found evidence that in today’s popular belief the two notions of Shambhala and Sukhāvātī fuse.<sup>94</sup> The Shambhala site in Dornogovi Aimag is considered “the epicenter of spiritual energy, the future refuge of the believers and the sole connection to the Buddha-Dharma at the time of the impending dangers of the conflict of global proportions.”<sup>95</sup> Pilgrims under the guidance of renowned lamas like Kyabje Gelek Rinpoche visit the site supposed to be “the official opening doorway to the Land of Shambhala.”<sup>96</sup>

Despite its popularity the pilgrimage site is not easily accessible. Most pilgrims use their own cars because there is no regular public transport. From Ulaanbaatar there is a regular night train to Sainshand, the nearest city, and from there one has to take a taxi or mini-van. According to Altangerel/Khatanbaatar the Gobi Sunrise Co. Ltd. provides regular minivan services.<sup>97</sup> There is, of course, always the possibility to book an organised tour with private bus transport to the site. The road to the monastic complex is not well maintained, and accommodation consists of some *ger* camps in the vicinity of Khamaryn Khiid. The tourist industry which usually develops quite rapidly in such places seems to be in its early stages. This also applies to the ubiquitous souvenir shops which attend to the urge to bring home “material memories”.<sup>98</sup> In 2013 I did not see any stalls at all at the Shambhala Energy Centre, whereas in 2016 I noticed two small stalls which offered Chinese-made rosaries,

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**92** [www.tibetan-museum-society.org/java/arts-culture-Shambhala-Rising.jsp](http://www.tibetan-museum-society.org/java/arts-culture-Shambhala-Rising.jsp) (last accessed 05.11.2017).

**93** Wallace 2008: 50.

**94** I did not find independent evidence of this unusual conjecture. The connection may derive from the colloquial use of the term *divaāžin* (from Tib. *bde ba can*, translating the Sanskrit *Sukhāvātī*) for “paradise”.

**95** Wallace 2008: 50.

**96** [www.jewelheart.org/trips/pilgrimage-to-mongolia-2014](http://www.jewelheart.org/trips/pilgrimage-to-mongolia-2014) (last accessed 05.11.2017).

**97** Altangerel/Khatanbaatar 2009: 63. However, in 2017 there is no information about this company available on the internet.

**98** Reader 2016: 147.

plastic wind horses (Mo. *khii mori*), a couple of white stone elephants and other regalia considered to be particularly auspicious (Figure 5). At the *ger* camps, however, religious souvenirs are sold at a larger scale.



Figure 5: Souvenirs.

## 5 Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre as a global pilgrimage place

Apart from the facts told here, we do not know much about Khamaryn Khiid's past as a pilgrimage place. According to Danzan Ravjaa's autobiography, there was a never ceasing stream of pilgrims to the Shambhala site.<sup>99</sup> In the fifties of last century, the Mongolian scholar Damdinsüren collected some oral history accounts,<sup>100</sup> but on the whole, there is not much independent data to fill this

<sup>99</sup> [www.tibetan-museum-society.org/java/arts-culture-Shambhala-Rising.jsp](http://www.tibetan-museum-society.org/java/arts-culture-Shambhala-Rising.jsp) (last accessed 05.11.2017).

<sup>100</sup> Damdinsüren 1961.

gap. In its heyday Khamaryn Khiid probably drew pilgrims from near and far alike. The attraction of this place was probably also heightened by the regular performance of Danzan Ravjaa's play *Life of the moon-kuckoo* (Mo. *Saran kököge-yin namtar*) which took place in Khamaryn Khiid.<sup>101</sup> This play was performed for nearly ninety years in many monasteries in the eastern Gobi and the Tsakhar regions.<sup>102</sup> In 1959 Damdinsüren still met some old people who remembered performances of the play in Khamaryn Khiid and adjacent monasteries.<sup>103</sup>

The development of Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre as a contemporary centre of pilgrimage is on one hand associated with the older tradition of Danzan Ravjaa and his Shambhala connection. On the other hand, the landscape surrounding the monastery is loaded with sacred meaning beyond its Buddhist connotations. Its caves, Bayanzurkh Uul and *mèém ovoo* not only draw on Buddhist concepts of retreat, asceticism and spiritual enlightenment but also include indigenous Mongolian notions of prosperity and good fortune. Furthermore, the Shambhala Maṇḍala complex and its visual culture is re-inscribed according to the expectations of a new international clientele, twenty-first-century pilgrims who often define themselves as spiritually aware but not necessarily exclusive followers of Buddhism. The Shambhala Energy Centre is discursively created as a sacred "power spot", or, more concretely, as "part of the energy centre of Mongolia". The red rocks that build round circles within the *stūpa*-surrounded square are said to radiate energy in the form of heat which is physically experienced if one lies down on these rocks. The American Lucy Thompson gives a summary of her experience in an article for the UB Post: "To make the most of this, we took off our shoes and lay on the ground. It may simply have been the opportunity this gave for individual reflection, or it may have been that the rocks did give us energy, but I believe I felt a difference."<sup>104</sup> To some Mongolian pilgrims the power or "energy" (Khalkh-Mo. *ènérgi*) of the site owes its origin to Danzan Ravjaa and his *adistid*, his sacred energy. Yet, the ascription of a sacred energy or power to Khamaryn Khiid transcends the domain of a particular religion and has been shaped by global religious flows that owe much to thinkers like the Rumanian scholar of religion Mircea Eliade. He influenced researchers like James Preston to think of pilgrimage places as radiating a "spiritual magnetism" that makes these places special,<sup>105</sup> thereby confirming an essential divide between the sacred and the profane.

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**101** This play was performed with lay actors and is considered to be a milestone in the development of a modern Mongolian theatre, see Batmunkh 2010: 51–58.

**102** Heissig 1964: 257.

**103** Heissig 1964: 259–260.

**104** [www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center](http://www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center) (last accessed 17.11.2017).

**105** Preston 1992.

In this paper it is not my aim to unravel these different religious layers. Instead, I will follow the linkage between pilgrimage and tourism at Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre. The pioneers in Pilgrimage Studies Victor and Edith Turner have once stated that a “tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist.”<sup>106</sup> The phenomena that attract pilgrims in Mongolia – the Buddhist temples, the natural numinous sites, the architecture, the religious festivals and ritual dances – also attract tourists. Both tourists and pilgrims share the same infrastructure, and often people combine pilgrimage with their yearly holiday, interchangeably assuming the roles of the tourist and the pilgrim. For these reasons, travel agencies have package tours to offer for both the tourist and the pilgrim. The above quoted UB Post article by Lucy Thompson stresses this commercial factor: “The UB Post’s second travel feature takes you on a trip to Khamriin Monastery. Those looking for their next holiday, whether it be a day trip or longer stay, can find practical information on places, prices, and times combined with real inspiration in these experiences.”<sup>107</sup> The added value of such a recreational holiday lies in the realm of the spiritual, because the place “is famed in Mongolia as having the strongest spiritual energy convergence in the world, and travellers visit from across the country to be rejuvenated and gain health, wealth, and fertility.”<sup>108</sup>

For the reasons presented here, it is highly problematic to think of pilgrimage and tourism in binary opposed terms. Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre is one of the places in Mongolia that is frequented equally by pilgrims and tourists, be they Mongolians or foreigners from abroad. In July 2016, I undertook with my Mongolian colleague Mungunchimeg Batmunkh a first, exploratory field research in Khamaryn Khiid and the Energy Centre, conducting interviews with Mongolian and foreign visitors as well as monks of the monastery, including the Khamba lama.<sup>109</sup> We asked tourist-pilgrims about their motivations to visit the pilgrimage place, about their preparations before and during their journey (for example whether they consulted astrologers or received blessings from a lama, or took vows to abstain from meat or alcohol

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**106** Turner/Turner 1978: 20.

**107** [www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center](http://www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center) (last accessed 17.11.2017).

**108** [www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center](http://www.theubpost.mn/2016/05/26/the-worlds-largest-energy-center) (last accessed 17.11.2017).

**109** We conducted structured interviews with the visitors (Mongolian and foreign), and expert interviews with some monks and the Khamba lama of Khamaryn Khiid. We also conducted an expert interview with Z. Altangérèl, the director of Gobi Noyon Khutagt Museum and current *takhilč* of the heritage of the Noyon Khutagt. All in all we conducted 13 interviews, the age of our interlocutors ranging from 21 to 76. I convey my sincere thanks to Mungunchimeg Batmunkh for her assistance in the field. Without her support, this research would not have been possible.

etc.), which of the various places they visited and what meanings they generally associate with Shambhala. The majority of our Mongolian interlocutors visit Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre for religious-pragmatic purposes, for instance to ensure success in their professional careers, or more generally for the welfare and prosperity of the family. As a middle-aged lady from Sainshand asserts: “It [= the visit] gives good energy (*énergité*), it influences positively. Here is the Khusél mountain, it belongs to Shambhala, and the mountain Bajanzürkh. There you go if your undertakings fail or a hindrance occurs, then you go there and whisper your wishes and beg.”<sup>110</sup> Whereas the lay visitors repeatedly mentioned the goal to get “good energy” (*sajkhan énergi*),<sup>111</sup> using the mongolised Russian term *énergi*, the Buddhist monks we interviewed connected this energy to the Buddhist notion of sacred energy, *adistid*. According to one monk, the “bio energy” (*bio énergi*) emanating from the place is produced by the *adistid* of Danzan Ravjaa.<sup>112</sup> The Khamba lama identifies the “energy”<sup>113</sup> with (Khalkh-Mo.) *adis žanlav*, the sacred energy or empowerment which is conducive to remove the pollutions and defilements accumulated in the human body. It is the place itself which radiates this powerful cleansing energy.

Asked about Shambhala, most lay people answered that they do not know anything about it, and the name does not seem to hold any specific meaning for them. The monks of Khamaryn Khiid have more specific ideas about Shambhala. They interpret Shambhala either as a Buddhist paradise (Khalkh-Mo. *divaažin*)<sup>114</sup> or a state of the mind Khalkh-Mo. *ojuny oron*).<sup>115</sup>

People flock to Khamaryn Khiid from all over Mongolia. We met families from places as far away as Sükhbaatar, Övörkhangai or Khentei Aimag. The popularity of the pilgrimage place is enforced by the attention it gets in the media. One old man, a former teacher, told us that he had followed the news about the rebuilding of the monastic site in television reports: “I have heard about the Energy Centre from the newspapers and television. The Noyon Khutagt of former times, Danzan Ravjaa, founded and built this monastery. Then it was destroyed. From the nineties onwards it was rebuilt and further developed. I got this information from television. Lately, Mongolians from many regions travel

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**110** Interview No. DS500004.

**111** Among others, interviews No. DS500004, DS500008, DS500009, DS500013.

**112** Interview No. DS500011. He used the term *žanlav*.

**113** Also described as *érčim khüč*, which can be translated as “intense power” (Interviews No. DS500011, DS500017).

**114** Interview No. DS500011. Khalkh-Mo. *divaažin* derives from Tib. *bde ba can*, the Tibetan rendering of the Buddha field *Sukhāvati*.

**115** Interview No. DS500017.

here. They come as tourists (*žuulčildag irdэг*).<sup>116</sup> How much pilgrimage and tourism, especially the pleasures of sightseeing are intertwined is noticeable in the particular lack of preparation the pilgrim-tourists undertake before and during the journey. Only one female pilgrim admitted to special preparations like putting on festive clothes and preparing “white food” (Khalkh-Mo. *cagaan idèè*). A minority of our interview partners addressed the touristic purpose of their visit which they, however, simultaneously combined with religious-pragmatic motives. One family aimed to visit all historically important places of Mongolia, including Khamaryn Khiid in their list. Another family combined their holiday with a visit to Khamaryn Khiid. They came for the first time, and one male family member rather sceptically said that they wanted to test whether the place’s spiritual potential really held what it promised: “[...] and then, if this whole year goes well with much energy, I will return in the next year.”<sup>117</sup> All but one of the families we interviewed travelled individually by car, only one elderly couple used the train. None had booked a package tour. People who live in Sainshand and vicinity usually visit many times throughout the year, but also some of the visitors from more distant places have already undertaken the pilgrimage two or more times.

Unfortunately, during our field stay we encountered only very few foreign visitors and some of them refused to be interviewed.<sup>118</sup> The few we were able to interview visited the Centre as part of a spiritual package tour to Mongolia’s “energy sites”. They were attracted by the Shambhala Energy Centre and the notion of Shambhala as a mystical centre of the world. Not drawn to a particular religion like Buddhism, they expressed New Age ideas about flows of spiritual energy that concentrate at certain places. The Shambhala Energy Centre at Khamaryn Khiid and the surrounding landscape they considered to be one of these places.<sup>119</sup> Some foreign visitors lay down on their backs in the middle of the stūpa-enclosed square to absorb the energy which they felt pulsing in the ground. We did not meet any Buddhist foreign pilgrims during our field research. Yet, it is well known that this pilgrimage place generally attracts many Buddhist pilgrims from overseas. Buddhist organisations in the United States offer package tours under the official label of “pilgrimage programs”, including in their program Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre. These organisations often combine tourist activities like hiking

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116 Interview No. DS500015.

117 Interview No. DS500008.

118 This may be due to the time of the year. At the end of July 2016 it was extremely hot in the Gobi.

119 Interview No. DS50010, conducted in English.

and religious activities like performing a mountain ritual.<sup>120</sup> One such package tour that includes Khamaryn Khiid was organised in the summer of 2014 by the US-based *Jonang Foundation*. This organisation offers pilgrimages as “customized educational travel programs designed to explore sacred spaces and pilgrimage sites throughout Buddhist Vajrayana culture.” According to its website, “Each pilgrimage program is an immersion into Buddhist life with lectures and discussions conducted onsite by specialists in small groups. Special attention is given to the study of Buddhist art, philosophy and history, and time in contemplative practice settings.” Apart from these spiritual goals, *Jonang Foundation* subscribes to “eco-tourism”, as it asserts: “We are ecologically conscious to leave minimal traces of our own pilgrim footprints on the land. Proceeds raised from this pilgrimage are allocated to education and cultural preservation projects that we facilitate on-the-ground.”<sup>121</sup> The impact of such tours on the dynamics of pilgrimage is imminent: Schedules and timetables become important, and the pilgrim is no longer able to follow his or her individual agenda and needs. Pilgrimage, which is often associated with physical hardship and temporary renunciation, becomes a “life-enriching experience” not only with regard to its spiritual aspects, but also in terms of tourist amenities: The *Jonang Foundation* promises “the highest quality accommodation and transportation”. This particular pilgrimage tour to Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre was led by my American colleague Professor Vesna Wallace from the University of California, Santa Barbara, who is a specialist on the *Kālacakra tantra*. The boundaries between the academic study of religion and active engagement in the religious field are not only blurred through the adaptation and implementation of scholarly concepts by religious agents, a process which is well known and has been widely discussed in scholarship, but also by actors who embody mutually exclusive roles in the recursive enactment of traditional ritual forms like pilgrimage. What impact this fusion of different roles has on the field, is worth examining, but cannot be followed up in this paper.

In 2016 a new pilgrimage tour organisation, *Buddhist Tour Mongolia*, started to operate in Ulaanbaatar.<sup>122</sup> It promises different types of travel like pilgrimage and meditation tours, but also trips to nature spots or city tours of Ulaanbaatar, combining touristic and religious goals. Prominently placed on the website is a

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**120** [www.jonangfoundation.org/pilgrimage-mongolia-2014](http://www.jonangfoundation.org/pilgrimage-mongolia-2014) (last accessed 05.11.2017).

**121** See the preceding note.

**122** [www.buddhisttourmongolia.com](http://www.buddhisttourmongolia.com) (last accessed 05.11.2017). My sincere thanks go to Ulrike Gonzales (Bonn University) who brought the agency to my attention and kindly sent the flyer of the tour operator to me.

photo of the Shambhala Energy Centre, also addressed as “World Energy Centre”. Offering a four-day “Khamar monastery tour”, the tourist agency asserts that “the area is believed to have a radiation with a spiritual energy fostered by the Gobi desert.”<sup>123</sup> The connection between spirituality and nature as its potent source that is evoked here has become a powerful commodity in the global market of religions.<sup>124</sup> *Buddhist Tour Mongolia* appeals to an international, English-speaking clientele that is not exclusively Buddhist and whose interest in Buddhism has been shaped by New Age notions of “Asian wisdom traditions.”<sup>125</sup>

Buddhist Mongolia and Khamaryn Khiid as a pilgrim’s goal are also discovered by travel agencies in Germany and Switzerland. For July and August 2016 the travel agency *nomadic ways* offered a pilgrimage package tour entitled “In the footsteps of the Buddha. A pilgrims’ journey to Mongolia with Lharampa Tenzin Kalden”. Tenzin Kalden is a well-known Tibetan Buddhist teacher in Switzerland, who was born in Tibet and raised in Southern India. He received his Geshe Lharampa degree at the monastic university of Sera in Southern India. In Switzerland, where he lives since many years, he completed a Master’s course in Interreligious spirituality at Lassalle House and Salzburg University. He was the spiritual guide on this journey which was also accompanied by the Mongolian tourist manager Durziijalbuu Sengee from the agency *nomadic ways*. One of the most prominent places to visit was again Khamaryn Khiid which was advertised as “part of the energy centre of Mongolia and therefore an important pilgrimage site for pious Buddhists.”<sup>126</sup>

The package tours briefly introduced here, promise a substantial financial gain for the organizers. They are affordable only for the well-to-do upper middle class in Europe and the United States.<sup>127</sup> For the Mongolians, however, this pilgrimage is much cheaper, even if they come from some distance. The proper pilgrimage starts at the temples of Khamaryn Khiid where the pilgrims do prostrations and offerings and chant prayers. Then they walk from the temples two kilometres to the Shambhala Energy Centre. Upon entering the square enclosed by the stūpas, they will stop at a low protruding rock with a concave

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<sup>123</sup> [www.buddhisttourmongolia.com/tours/khamar-monastery-trip/#01-1](http://www.buddhisttourmongolia.com/tours/khamar-monastery-trip/#01-1) (last accessed 05.11.2017).

<sup>124</sup> Carrette/King 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Carrette/King 2007: 96.

<sup>126</sup> [www.lharampa-tenzin.ch/Tenzin/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Auf-Buddhas-Spuren-Entwurf-Durzii](http://www.lharampa-tenzin.ch/Tenzin/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Auf-Buddhas-Spuren-Entwurf-Durzii) (last accessed 11.07.2016).

<sup>127</sup> An exception to this rule may be *Buddhist Tour Mongolia* that explicitly offers “quality pilgrimage tour[s] at a fair price”. The price list, however, is not available on the website.

depression called “The stomach of the hungry ghost”. At that spot, the pilgrims should burn previously prepared papers on which they have listed their non-auspicious deeds in this lifetime. A bit further in the square, they come to three small rock cairns building a diagonal line. The rocks point to Bayanzurkh Uul, the sacred mountain of the Third Noyon Khutagt. Here the pilgrims offer vodka. They will finally reach the most sacred part of the Shambhala Energy Centre, a small round hill on whose top is the *Tarkhi Ovoo* (Figure 6). The hill itself resembles a *kapāla*, a skull-cup used in tantric ritual, upon which an *oboo* is placed. The pilgrims circumambulate the *oboo*, all the while reciting wish-prayers to be reborn in Shambhala after death.



Figure 6: Tarkhi ovoo.

Not all visitors follow this prescribed pilgrimage path. Some start their pilgrimage at the site of the *Tontoon ovoo* in early morning at sunrise, according to oral tradition considered to be the most auspicious time for offerings. Then they proceed directly to the Shambhala Energy Centre, leaving out the temple complex of Khamaryn Khiid.

## 6 Conclusion

The pilgrimage site of Khamaryn Khiid and the Shambhala Energy Centre in Dornogovi Aimag poses an impressive example how densely interwoven tourism and pilgrimage are. This phenomenon is neither exclusive to Mongolia nor is it something new. Drop the contested term “tourism” and talk instead of “travel and trade”, and the historical entanglement of these mundane spheres with pilgrimage will be more than obvious. Since many centuries, pilgrimage has been shaped by the marketplace.<sup>128</sup> Whereas due to the lack of sources it may be difficult to shed more light on the entanglement between the worldly and religious aspects of Mongolian pilgrimage in a historical perspective, we can study this interplay with regard to contemporary pilgrimage places in Mongolia. Furthermore, in the current times of globalized Buddhism, Mongolia has become attractive as a pilgrims’ goal for a Western clientele that identifies with Buddhism or a more unspecific spirituality and aims to combine ecologically inspired tourism with spiritual experience. This is a more recent development. In the early 1990s Mongolia was advertised in international tourism as the “land of the shamans”. Judging by the statements of one foreign interlocutor at the Shambhala Energy Centre,<sup>129</sup> the perception of Mongolia as a powerful centre of nature-bound shamans is still very much alive and a strong incentive to visit the place. In many a pilgrim’s imagination it is merged with a Buddhist notion of a spiritually loaded sacred place. With regard to new age ideas the Shambhala Energy Centre has certainly turned into a “power spot” where notions of a “concentrated spiritual energy”<sup>130</sup> have permeated the traditional Mongolian pilgrimage place. The ritualized physical movements of the pilgrims constitute such pilgrimage places as infrastructural nodes in a network that is related by “movement and spatial fixity.”<sup>131</sup> It comes to live mainly through ritual performances which entangle places and persons through an intricate web of meanings. In this way, the people who perform pilgrimages – the pilgrims – actively shape these nodes through their expectations, needs and actions. This implies that the importance and meanings that are ascribed to these places and in turn constitute them are contingent and constantly negotiated. In times of global cultural flows that shape local cultures it remains to be seen how the pilgrimage places in Mongolia will be affected by these dynamics.

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**128** Reader 2016: 112–137; Stausberg 2010: 50–52.

**129** Interview No. DS500010.

**130** Reader 2015: 112.

**131** Sheller 2011: 3. Compare also Reader 2015: 23.

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