Animate Landscapes: An Introduction grounded in examples from the Republic of Buryatia, Russian Federation[1]

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Introduction:

As we face the ongoing climate catastrophe and widespread environmental challenges, scholars, activists and the general public have taken an increased interest in the environmental ideas and practices of indigenous populations. The terms 'animism' and 'animate landscape' crop up in academic and other publications with increasing frequency, and yet few people in the environmental sciences community, or the general public, understand what this means. The physical sciences, growing primarily out of a European Enlightenment tradition, generally relate to physical matter as inanimate.[2] This distinction between inanimate matter and animate humans and animals is the conceptual and grammatical basis underlying modernist scientific projects, not so much proven as presumed. It is often, therefore, extremely difficult for people educated within this tradition to wrap their minds around the idea of animate landscapes. My goal here is to illustrate what an animate landscape is for an audience of students and environmental scientists educated from within a Western post-Enlightenment perspective.

The most important concept to take away from this essay is that an animate landscape is not a type of landscape, but rather the product of a relationship with a place. Mountains, grottos, rocks, rivers, lakes and other bodies of water, in short, any place can be an interlocutor in such a

[1] This photo essay grew out of the year I spent as a fellow in the College of the Environment. My deepest thanks to Barry Chernoff, director of the College of the Environment, who invited me to participate, and to Antonio Machado-Allison, Helen Poulos, Marcela Oteiza, Fred Cohen, Isaac Kleinschmidt, Margaret O'Donnell and Fiona McLeod who participated in the College's think tank, and whose intellectual companionship and stimulation made my reflection possible. The views expressed here are of course my own.

[2] It should be noted that this distinction between inanimate matter and animate spirit originates in Christianity. Although modernist Enlightenment scientific projects grew out of an opposition to Christian cosmologies, they inherited the animate/inanimate distinction. Data on pre-Christian European traditions are limited, as most written records begin with Christianization, but there is good reason to believe that Europe was once filled with animate landscapes as well, and so when terms such as 'European' or 'Western' I am referring to Christian and post-Christian Enlightenment philosophical, scientific and colonial projects that originated in Europe but are neither confined to Europe, nor encompass all of Europe. There is considerable evidence that European peasants may have maintained attenuated relationships to animate landscapes well into the 19th century.

relationship. Animate landscapes are as variable as the peoples and places who engage in such relationships. The examples offered here are meant to illustrate the idea, using examples from my fieldwork in the Republic of Buryatia, Russian Federation. They should not be taken as a set form against which other examples should be measured, but rather as an illustration of what a relationship with an animate landscape might look like. The kinds of beings that live in the landscape, and the kinds of relationships people have with them will vary depending on the place and the culture. There is no reason that places in the Americas, Africa, Europe or Australia should look, behave or act like the ones in Siberia. Rather, I hope that by understanding what an animate landscape is in Siberia, you will be more likely to be able to recognize and ask productive questions about such landscapes elsewhere.

Hotun Khan / Shaman's Rock, Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal, Irkutsk Oblast

In Russian, this outcropping on Olkhon Island, Lake Baikal, is referred to as Shaman's Rock (Russ. - *shamanskaia skala*) because it is a place to which shamans come and make offerings. Olkhon Island, a large island on the western shore of Lake Baikal, is considered by both Buryats

and Russians alike to be an axis mundi, the geographical center of the Eurasian continent and a place where Sky and Earth are particularly connected. Many Buryats consider Lake Baikal to be their ancestral homeland. In Buryat the lake is called the Baikal Sea (Bur. - *Baigal Dalai*) and this rock is called Khotun or Hotun Khan by shamans who travel from elsewhere in Buryatia.[3] As a foreigner, I too refer to shaman's rock as Hotun Khan. Shamans from Olkhon Island, however, refer to this place as Khotun Khoto Baabai (Bernstein 2008)). The first part of the name, as you can see, is the same – Khotun or Khoto or Hotun – that would be the being's personal name. Shamans from elsewhere use the honorific title of Khan – lord, when they address Hotun – he is, after all, the Lord of this place. The title Khan was used to address political leaders in the past, and is still used to address spirit beings in Buryatia and Mongolia, although the most famous Khan is of course, Genghis Khan. The title is the same, with the same implications – that of ruler. Shamans from Olkhon, however, refer to this same being/place as Baabai, which means father or grandfather in Buryat. Since they are from this place, he is their ancestor, and they can use a kinship term when they speak to or refer to him. The name is the same, but the title a person or shaman uses, also indexes their relationship to place. Locals use kinship terms, while non-locals use term of respect.

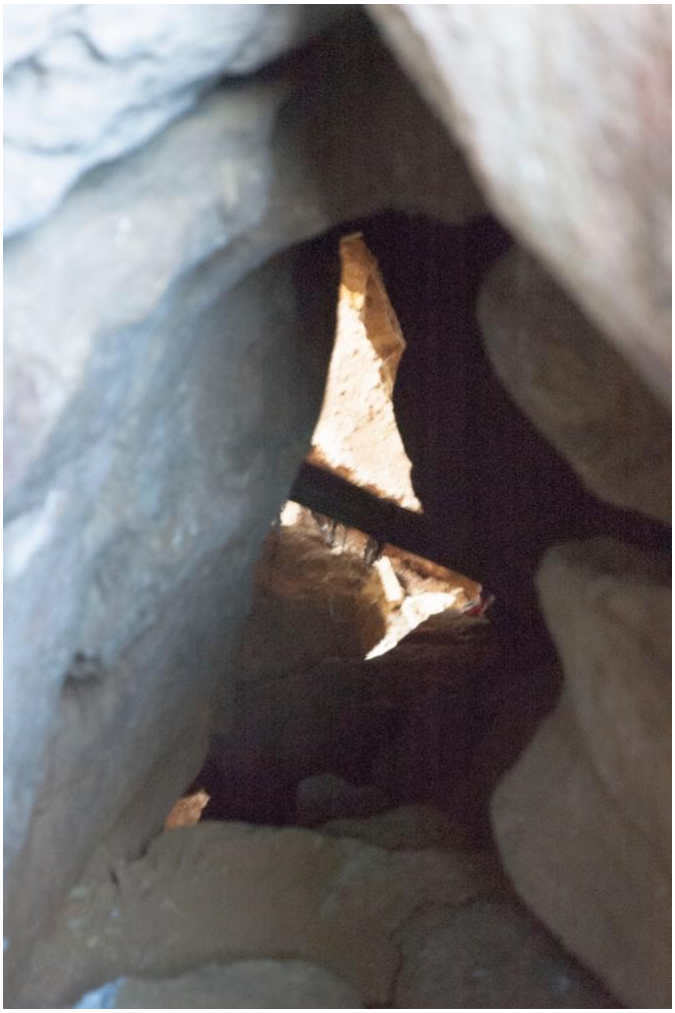
[3] Buryat has an "h" phoneme, but Russian does not. Buryat has only been written in the Cyrillic alphabet since the 1930's and the Latin letter 'h' was added to the Cyrillic alphabet to accommodate this sound. This means that prior to the 1930's Buryat words with an 'h' sound were written with the Cyrillic 'Kh' when written in Russian. Buryat was written in Old Mongolian calligraphy prior to the Soviet reforms I have been told both spellings in the field, and I consider trying to determine the "proper" spelling to be an exercise of linguistic purism that erases the multi-linguistic, multi-dialectical context.

This photograph gives you a sense of scale. The shamans in the picture are male members of the shaman's group Tengeri, making offerings in August, 2005. The shamans live and work in the city of Ulan-Ude, which is on the other side of the lake, so they are not local. They refer to the rock as Hotun Khan. They travel to Olkhon once a year to hold a ritual, make offerings and ask for the general well-being of the Buryat people. The first time they did this, Hotun entered the body of one of them, and asked that they make an offering once a year, every year for 17 years. They promised to do that, and as far as I know, they have fulfilled that promise.

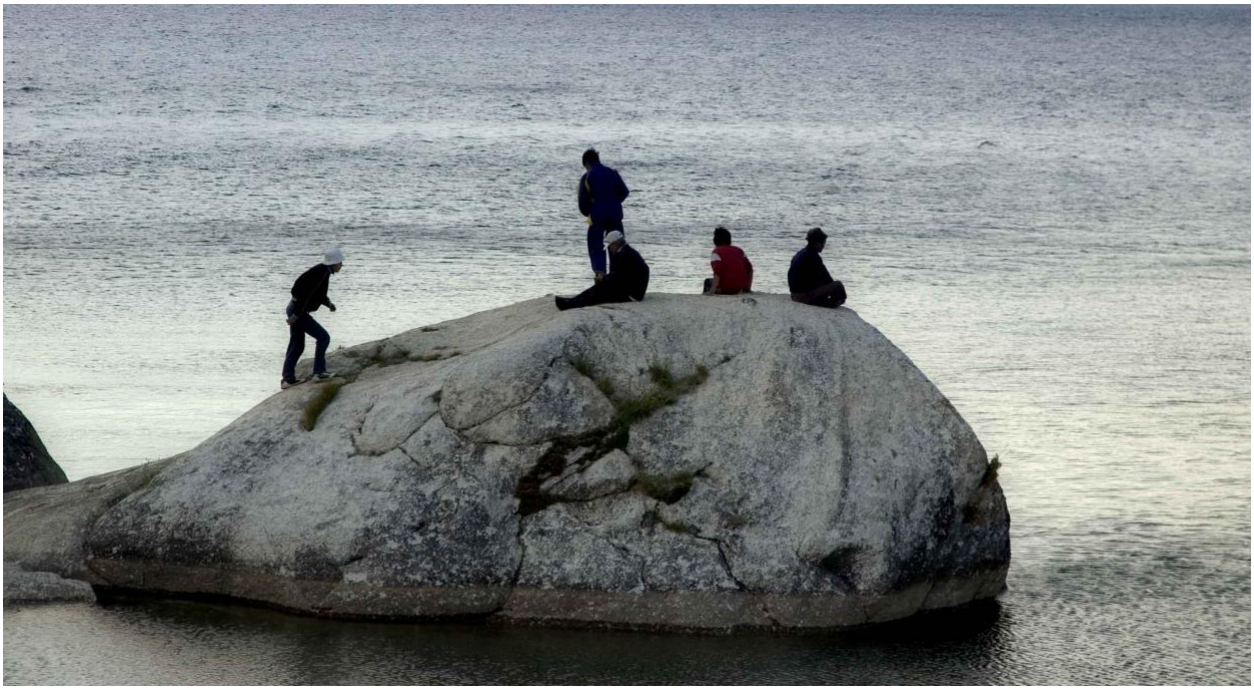
The offering in this photo was a private offering made on their arrival on the island. The first thing they did after settling into the rooms they rented, was to drive out to Hotun Khan to show their respect, to let him know they had arrived and were going to hold a ritual.
Anyone can worship Hotun Khan, although many shamans say that women should not set foot on the rock. How someone worships Hotun Khan and what they may offer or ask for will vary depending on who they are. Shamans from elsewhere will certainly make offerings and honor Khotun Khan, but they are more likely to as only for general protection.

The male members of the group, which include practicing shamans, as well as their male relatives, are all saying prayers to Hotun Khan and offering khadaks, which are blue silk scarves, usually purchased at Buddhist temples. Khadak are used to welcome guests, or to present gifts, and are left at or tied around sacred sites to mark that an offering has been made. If you don't have a khadak, any strip of fabric, or other offerings, like coins, matches or vodka will do. Offerings accumulate at a site, letting newcomers know where spirit beings live. People traveling through a landscape will leave offerings at such sites in order to pay their respects to the local spirit master, even if they do not know the spirit's name. Shrines like this are often found

alongside roads. If you forget to pay your respects, the master of the place can cause car accidents or other problems to punish you for entering their territory without acknowledging their authority. Many of the people who live in Buryatia, both ethnic Russians, and Buryats, will leave offerings at these roadside shrines “just in case.”



This is a hole, or grotto in the rock. I was told that in previous years, the passage had been blocked by falling stones, because Hotun Khan had been offended by visiting female Russian tourists in bikinis. In 2005, the hole was open. The shamans all insisted that this opening was a sign that Hotun Khan was happy with the rituals they had been conducting. Hotun Khan and other spirit masters (Russ. - *khoziain*) communicate through signs such as this. People who have a relationship to this place learn to read signs that indicate whether or not the spirit master is happy and protecting them, and if not, how to fix the relationship. Generally, a spirit master who is treated with respect will be a good landlord, and all those who live on their land will flourish. A spirit master who is ignored or mistreated will take their revenge by making life harsh and causing accidents, illness or other problems.



After the formal offering ceremony, those who made the offerings stayed to sit and enjoy the view for a while.

Someone who calls Hotun Baabai (father/grandfather) will likely make small offerings far more often. They will need to acknowledge him in one form or another, whether by leaving a ribbon or a coin at the site, every time they pass by, but they are also able to demand greater levels of protection and care from Hotun. Conversely, they also have greater obligations to speak up and object, when, for example, Russian tourists come to the site. And while Russian and other tourists are perceived by locals as desecrating the site, local Russian fishermen will make offerings to and demand protection from a being that, as local residents, they may well call him Baabai - father (see for example Bernstein 2006). The relationship with Hotun is not based solely on ethnicity, but also on proximity. Local residents, Buryat or Russian, have the closest relationship, the most mutual obligation, and call him Father. Buryats from further away call him Lord, and make offerings, but the relationship is not as close. It used to be that tourists didn't even know he was there, but recently the local government put up a sign to inform tourists that this is a sacred site.

Korsakovo, Republic of Buryatia

Some places that are considered animate are dramatic features of the landscape, like Hotun Khan, but a place doesn't have to be dramatic to be in a relationship. These are offerings from members of the Wolf Clan, made to their ancestors at an offering ceremony, called a *tailgan*, which is held once a year in a big field in a village in southern Buryatia. Many clan members still live in the village. Some of those who do not, return every year to attend the offering ceremony. They bring cookies, candies, vodka, milk and sour cream, and every three years they sacrifice a sheep, which is boiled, offered to the ancestors and then eaten by those present. Their ancestors lived here, their relatives still live here, and once a year the living and the dead come together in this place to share a meal. The ancestors and the place are linked, in that one cannot make offerings to these ancestors anywhere else. This is where they are, and they watch over those who still live there.

The year I attended, they sacrificed a sheep, which is being boiled in this picture. The clan's shaman, the man in the brown suit, is preparing the sacrifice. As shaman, he is responsible for overseeing the ritual, making the appropriate offerings, and reading the signs that tell the family that their ancestors are satisfied. One of the clan members who came back for the annual ceremony is a scholar who works in the capital city. He brought a camera crew along (as well as a foreign visiting anthropologist – me) to document the ritual.

The clan shaman, on the left, and the women of the clan, offer milk products, white foods, to the ancestors, by sprinkling them on the land. Women feed visitors, and see off the spirits as they end the ceremony. The offerings ensure that the spirits of this place, who are also their ancestors, will watch over the living and take care of them. While one can consider rituals like this to be a form of ancestor worship, the place matters to the ritual as much as the ancestors. The land absorbs the offerings. The ancestors will not hear the prayers or receive the offerings if they are made in a different place – this is where they live. This is a relationship between the members of a family and their home, between people and a place, as much as between the living and the dead members of a family.

Alkhanai National Park, Aginsky District, formerly Aga Autonomous region, Chita Oblast

Alkhanai is a national park in Chita oblast, east of Lake Baikal and near the Mongolian border. The whole area is considered a sacred area, although certain spots within the park are more sacred than others. This is a healing spring near the park entrance, where people come to bathe in order to treat a variety of illnesses (see Metzo 2008). People have tied khadaks and other pieces of fabric to the tree to pay respect to the spirits of the place. These kinds of offerings can look like trash to outsiders, but the fabric is considered a prayer, a variation of the prayer flags that are sold at Tibetan Buddhist temples, and which are called *Khi Morin*, or wind horses, in Buryat. Fabric takes on qualities of the person who wore it, and as the fabric slowly decays the prayers are swept up on the wind, like horses carrying the prayers where they need to go. Each strip of fabric is a communication between the person who left it, and the place, and the accumulation of these signs index the power of the relationships between people and places. If people stop communicating with this place, the traces of that relationship will fade and disappear from the landscape. During the Soviet period, when people were afraid to engage in religious practices, some of the sacred sites were forgotten, but many have been found and re-vitalized in the past decades.

The fabric prayers work in a way that is similar to the stones which Jewish visitors leave on graves, or to the offerings which pilgrims leave at Catholic shrines. The primary difference is that graves and Catholic shrines are made by humans, whereas this spring, and the other sites where offerings are made are not. In all three cases, however, leaving something behind acknowledges that you paid your respects, that you established or acknowledged a relationship by leaving something of yourself.

This is a close-up of the previous photograph. In this photo we can see that people have also offered tobacco, in the form of cigarettes, matches, coins and beads. All of these are acceptable offerings. What matters is that you acknowledge the place in some way.

Alkhanai is a good example of how animate landscapes are incorporated into multiple belief systems, and meanings can become layered onto them. Alkhanai mountain is considered a sacred site within northern forms of Buddhism, and several people told me that it is the actual location of Shambala. This rock formation is called the Temple Gate, or the gate to Shambala and a Buddhist monument, called a *stupa* or *suburgan*, was built at the site. Alkhanai was an animate landscape where people came to make offerings long before Buddhism came to Buryatia. When Buddhism spread to the area, the pre-existing relationships to place, and the kinds of offerings that people made to express that relationship were subsumed into Buddhist rituals. Eventually, in 1999, this animate landscape was incorporated into the secular form of the national park.

This is a grotto on Alkhanai mountain. This grotto was one of the highlights of the tour we took through Alkhanai, because it, as well as a nearby spot, are places where you are able to pray for fertility. Galdanova, a Buryat scholar, states that grottos like this one are associated with the earth goddess Etugen, but I never heard anyone mention this goddess in popular practice (Galdanova 1987). If you had come to Alkhanai to pray for a child you were supposed to squeeze through the rock crevice. Nearby there is a small overhang. You are supposed to reach in and the number of rocks you pull out foretell the number of children you will have. In my case, the prediction was correct. I pulled out two pebbles and have since had two children. I met several women in the capital city of Ulan-Ude, which is a day's travel away, who told me that they conceived their own children after traveling to Alkhanai to pray for a child. They were all women with advanced university degrees and based on their ages, they would have made the trip during the 1970's, during the late socialist period, which shows that relationships to animate landscapes can be remarkably persistent, even when social forces are pushing against them. Although none of these women were sure they "believed" in beings living at Alkhanai, they traveled there and established a relationship to the place, and the proof of that relationship, for them, was the existence their children. The beings at this place had answered their prayers.

All three of these places are animate because they participate in relationships with people – they act on people's lives, whether it is by causing car accidents, ensuring prosperity or endowing people with children, and they communicate with them through signs, like prosperity, illness, blocked crevices and prognosticating pebbles. This relationship can be as modest as that between a clan and their home, in which places are called grandfather and given offerings once a year. These relationships can be as extenuated as that of a person who has only visited a site once, to pray for a child. In all three cases, however, people recognize that the land is a being that has power over them, and establish a relationship with that place so as to flourish with it.

Citations:

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