7

Managing the Landscape's Resources

In this and the next chapter I shift the focus from ideas about personhood and intimate household relations to explore the way in which particular interactions with the landscape reveal resources that allow people to live here. Two activities that involve movement between spatial 'territories' and temporal 'domains' will be examined. First, I focus on young male hunters who move between the forest and the encampment to secure produce that they sell to passing traders. The effects of these activities often render their practices risky, but the monetary rewards frequently outweigh these risks. Secondly, I examine the Buriad's interest in gleaning information about the past inhabitants of this place, as they attempt to engage in wider discourses about pre-socialist Mongolian history and legitimate their position in the landscape. Focus on these two activities reveals that movement between territories, such as encampment (centre) and forest (periphery), or temporalities, such as past and present, can be viewed as analogous to the difference between one's rebirth-self and one's position as a son or daughter, the hidden and visible components of the household chest, or indeed to the Buriad's position in Mongolia versus their belonging to some past place.

In making these comparisons, I aim to draw attention to wider anxieties felt by the Buriad towards the landscape and to recent claims over its potential resources. While many people turned to pastoral livestock herding as a form of subsistence in the 1990s—with herds consisting of cattle, horses, sheep, and sometimes goats—other forms of economic activity were also entered into in order to raise the funds to buy goods such as DVD players, antennas, and jeeps, or to pay university fees. These were all acquired through activities such as the illegal sale of hunted animal parts (especially antlers), the building of wooden log houses, or the sale of pine nuts and berries which are gathered from the forests that surround the area to the north. In contrast

to other districts in the Mongolian countryside, the ability to source these resources locally and trade in them with city clients is held to be unique. Alongside these means of subsistence, however, other ideas as to what the land has to offer also clamour for attention. Archaeologists have been excavating ancient graves in the area, gold miners are scraping away at valleys, causing rivers to become polluted, and a non-governmental organization (NGO) is drawing up boundaries for a National Park. New land privatization laws in Mongolia are also bringing to the fore questions about access to resources and who exactly is entitled to them.

The Buriad are very aware that the land they currently live in contains multiple resources that must be managed carefully in order to remain sustainable. For each claim, however, the history of the people who used to live in this landscape weighs heavily beneath people's feet. As ideas about access to resources are debated, questions about who actually owns the land become vitally important. In this context, knowledge of the landscape's pre-socialist past is increasingly valued as claims to different resources jostle for recognition. Because the Buriad are relative newcomers to the area in which they currently reside, they lack knowledge of the landscape's history and of its past inhabitants. Local shamans emphasize that although decisions concerning access to resources are often determined from outside, such resources can only really be accessed once relations with the invisible land masters, who take the form of previous human inhabitants, have been established. They claim to have established contact with these past inhabitants who have endorsed the Buriad as 'good' people who should remain here. Through this kind of endorsement, they go some way towards legitimating their own authority in this place. No longer is it dominated by a history of Mongolian statehood from which they are excluded, or the location of a crumbled Soviet project; it is a place in which they are able to hold authority on their own terms.

Movement in the landscape

Living at Renchin's encampment, I often had the sense that our activities were similar to those on board a ship. In the mornings, once the cows had been milked, and we were sipping our first cups of milky tea, we discussed what needed to be done during the day. A common kind of conversation would start with Renchin saying to no one in particular, 'The large enclosure needs repair. I'll go there.' Someone would respond that they could source the wood needed for the fence. Another might add that they would

collect some essential tool from a nearby family and fetch the daily supply of water from the river on the way. In such a way, plans were formed and people took on various tasks for the day. If young children were around, they would join Delgermaa or the other women in some task. Inevitably, these tasks were not always carried out as planned. Things were often delayed. Some crucial piece of equipment needed repair, or funds for oil or petrol had to be sourced. In such instances it was common for men in the household to leave on some errand in the mornings and return home much later (sometimes several days later), obviously drunk. As women of the encampment we spent a lot of time getting on with what tasks could be completed in their absence and made sure to hide any vodka bottles that had been brought to the household, either as a gift from some passing visitor or bought at the kiosk in the district centre. Finding places to hide vodka became increasingly difficult. At one point during the summer we even went as far as burying a bottle in the ground and placing another in a bag in the yoghurt barrel. Despite delays and minor hiccups, which never seemed to make much difference to the overall flow of things anyway, things moved forward. In the evenings, when we gathered inside the house, the fruits of our labour surrounded us, literally, in the form of large barrels of yoghurt and cream, and sacks of flour and sugar that were placed along the walls. Trays of drying curds were balanced on beams, and pieces of meat hung from hooks. The chimney, attached to the stove in the centre, reached up and out of the top of the tent like a huge mast, while the beams supported the layers of felt and canvas that sheltered us from the wind and rain.

In this description I hint at the similarity between the passage of a ship at sea and the practice of pastoral herding. In saying this, I do not mean to suggest that seasonal movements are not planned or known. Destinations are always very much pre-determined. In the late summer of 2007 everyone knew, for example, who exactly would be moving to the autumn pasture on Sunday. Before we could depart (*nüüh*, lit. move), however, certain tasks had to be completed. Another four days of milking were needed, flour had to be purchased, and someone had to come and collect the barrels of cream for sale in the city. The similarity is, then, concerned not so much with the movement of a vessel at sea, as with the way in which, when attached to an encampment, people have to accomplish certain tasks in order to move to a new place. While different seasonal encampments provide different kinds of grazing for the herds, specific seasonal activities also have to be completed in particular places. In this sense, it is the tasks, once completed, that provide the opportunity for movement.

Other anthropologists writing about Mongolia have also noted the

similarity between pastoral herding and a ship at sea. Chabros (1988) suggests that the Mongols do not see relocation to different pastures as movement as such. Rather, she argues, it is the surrounding landscape that may be thought of as moving while the house remains centred and stable in different places (Chabros 1988). As we have seen, parts of the house and its contents are relocated, so that a continuity is afforded in different places. Encampments are also marked with tethering posts (Bur. *tsirig*), enclosures, outhouses, and buried placentas that mark the space as attached to particular people. Pedersen has also pointed out that nomadism may be perceived as a sailing-like activity (Pedersen 2007a: 317). While people move to different locations, in one sense they are not moving at all, for the whole point about nomadic migration is for the world to repeat itself: one moves to maintain stability and sameness (Pedersen: 2007a). In such a way, we may speak of the nomadic landscape as 'organised according to the constellation of centres that exist within it' (Pedersen 2007a: 316).[1] If certain locations in the landscape can be viewed as centres or points, then how does one perceive the vast unmarked territory that is not inhabited in this way? Pedersen (2007a) suggests that this landscape may be perceived as a 'void'. The 'void', he states, 'comprises the chunks of space which exist outside the above grid of planets and gravitation points [such as household encampments and *ovoo*s] . . . it is upon these disparate chunks of unmarked and unqualified space that the nomads' livestock are put to grass, and across which they themselves must move when visiting one other, and when migrating' (Pedersen 2007a: 316). Here, the landscape's unmarked territory provides the background by which a constellation of various points or centres is foregrounded and linked.

This tension between movement across a void and fixed locations in a centred stillness is marked in many ways. Alongside movement to different seasonal places, people also move away from the house and set out for other places. For example, at certain times of the year, people disperse to the mountains (*uulnuu*) to go hunting, or nut and berry collecting, to look after children who are studying at school in the district centre, or to nearby cities to find work and employment. Sometimes, however, the 'void' that comprises the unmarked territory, or the 'sea' that transports people, becomes a force to be reckoned with, forcing people to pause and tend to it in various ways.

[1] Pedersen notes 'Some of these centres—such as the nomadic households (*ail*)—are moving, whereas others—such as the sacred stone cairns (*ovoo*) found on top of mountain passes —remain fixed. [In such a way] a given nomadic household forms part of a sort of planetary system, whose individual and collective movements during the nomadic migration cycle are determined by the mutual positioning of each nomadic singularity as well as by certain gravitation points, such as the *ovoos*' (Pedersen 2007a: 316).

People's experiences of the landscape can become unpredictable if they inadvertently traverse into 'hard or difficult places' (*hatuu gazar*), or stumble across a place where the past inhabitants of the landscape are said to reside.

An animate landscape

Anthropological works on landscape have frequently stressed that the term 'landscape' has its origins in a genre of northern European painting that viewed the land as something to be observed from a distance (Bender 1993, 2001; Hirsch 1995; Humphrey 1995; Leach 2004; Olwig 1993; Willerslev forthcoming).[2] Anthropologists have argued that this perspective has continued to characterize anthropological concepts of 'land' as a 'scape', 'territory', or 'vista'. Bender (1993), for example, notes that we should be mindful of the fact that in other places vision may not be the most significant aspect of the landscape. She critiques the emphasis on a visual and static 'scape' in which the observer *stands back* from the thing observed (Bender 2001). Instead, she stresses that landscape is a process, whereby action rather than sight creates spaces, which are always in a process of construction and reconstruction. Land, then, is not to be viewed as somehow complete and stable. People hold different ideas about the landscape and revise these as they move within it.

Among the Buriad, as indeed among all Mongol groups, the idea that the land is created through the passive receipt of our gaze is also unfamiliar. Landscapes are not simply vistas or 'scapes' to be viewed from a distance. While encampments may be fixed points linked across a territory or void, at times this void is filled with various kinds of agency that need attending. In relation to this, Humphrey (1995) has noted that 'it is not contemplation of the land (*gazar*) that is important [in Mongolian culture] but interaction with it, as something which energises far greater than the human' (Humphrey 1995: 135). The idea that interaction with the land energizes people is closely intertwined with the animistic belief of shamanism, whereby landscapes are attributed various 'spirits' (see Chapter 2; Humphrey and Sneath 1999). Like other Mongols, it is common for Buriads to claim that things in nature have an owner or spirit. These spirits do not simply 'dwell' in places in the landscape, they actually constitute the physical world (Humphrey 1995). From

[2] Of course, Western concepts of landscape are not solely defined by distanced objectivity, and landscapes have been apprehended in diverse and varied ways in art and elsewhere (cf. Ingold 2000, 2008).

such a perspective, places are made up of specific formations and contours that are more akin to 'agentive artefacts' that affect humans just as much as humans affect them.

Different relations are fostered between people and the land's 'spirits' or 'masters' to manage the way people are able to utilize resources. For instance, in Chapter 2 we saw that it is common for people to honour local land masters at mountain ceremonies in order to receive the fecundity and protection that allows them to live and rear animals at certain encampments. The landscape surrounding the encampment should be plentiful (*buyantai gazar*), so that people and animals can prosper, and numerous criteria must be met before one chooses a place to settle. I was told that, having selected a place, a person should dig a small hole in the ground and then place a handful of rice at the bottom. Filling the hole up again with the extracted soil, if a small mound forms above ground level the place is safe to settle on. Sometimes the land does not accept one living there. Choosing a new place to settle one year for their autumn pasture, in between two hills in a small opening in the forest, Renchin explained that they were surprised to find that their usually healthy cattle started to become ill and some died. In consultation with the diviner, they learnt that they should move immediately as the place was full of 'quick, mobile, and violent spirits' (*güüdeltei, dogshin gazar*, lit. a cruel running track place) who rushed through particular areas in the landscape and caused their animal fortune to disperse. They rallied together extended family, and fifteen people carried their wooden house over the hills to another location.

It is generally thought that removing, or taking things, from the landscape without making offerings to the land masters of that place may result in punishment. But some places are considered harder, harsher, more violent and severe than others (*taaralgüi gazar, güüdeltei, dogshin gazar, hatuu gazar, bugtai gazar, chötgörtöi gazar, hünd shiriüün, dogshin gazar*). It is said that dogs and cattle know such a place and will not lie down there. Young children, too, can see 'bad invisible things' (*muu hii yüm*) that gather in these places and become scared when they pass through them. Chopping down trees, hunting wild animals, or even just taking a stone when travelling through such a place may provoke the invisible agents (*ad, chötgör*) who reside there. At a place called the White Rock, for example, it was rumoured that a man had been cursed by the local land masters because he had inadvertently taken a stone from one of the rock's caves, and this caused his children to become seriously ill.

I spent several summers learning how to navigate a small boat in the Baltic Sea. Movement in the Stockholm archipelago requires a three-

dimensional awareness of space. Navigation may be done in relation to one or more of the 40,000 visible islands, but one must also be aware of the many submerged rocks that are concealed beneath the sea's surface. Attending to that which is visible (islands), as well as that which is invisible or concealed (submerged rocks, which also vary in their threat according to shifts in water levels), to allow for the movement of one's vessel resonates with ideas of movement in the 'seascape' that is the landscape for the Buriad. While herds are mobile, running across the landscape's surface, several points jut out and provide navigational markers. These markers may be visible sites, such as cairns or encampments, but others may be invisible, such as the dangerous 'running tracks' where undesirable spirits rush. Like currents or submerged rocks, these 'running tracks' divert and play havoc with people's journeys. Rather than a flat surface, apprehended from a distance and constituting a void, the landscape becomes a field of interpretation that is choppy, variable, and dynamic. With skill, this flux of different elements may be utilized, allowing people to move and benefit from the resources in a given terrain. In attending to relations with land masters and various landscape spirits, we see that the landscape becomes not one of a passage between discrete centres which punctuate a void, but an interactive field of engagement.[3]

Hunting: movement across spatial territories

At certain times of the year, Mongolian middlemen from Ulaanbaatar claiming to represent important Chinese and Korean businessmen arrive in Ashinga to purchase rare animal parts from local hunters. These include the heart, fur, and testicles of the bear, and the testicles, gallbladder, and antlers of the male deer. Badger, sable, and wild boar parts are also desirable, as are antlers of various kinds (so-called 'blood' and 'dry' antlers). Younger couples are frequently relying on their parents to tend to their animals, as they

[3] Chabros (1988) has examined Mongolian concepts of space in terms of ideas of passage. First, there is the passage from one kind of space to another, such as that leading from one river valley to the next, which defines the people of one territory, or the movement to different seasonal encampments (Chabros 1988: 31). Secondly, there is the passage from the forest to the steppe, or from the countryside to the district centre/city. Certain sources of wealth and fortune exist in domains characterized by this second kind of passage. For pastoralists, Chabros explains, wealth is dependent on accumulation of herds and concentrations, pointing to the idea of centre and periphery (Chabros 1988: 32). In contrast, hunting wealth, associated with this second kind of passage, is concerned with exchange between the hunter and the hunted in the forest.

explore alternative sources of income, such as hunting and trading. But hunting for animal parts to sell to traders is illegal. Many of the target species are considered 'rare' or 'endangered' and in need of protection by the Mongolian state. Nevertheless, men in Ashinga have developed techniques that avoid the attention of local rangers and land masters, who may be angered by their actions.[4] Hunters are very aware of the fact that one cannot just take from the land without performing offerings of respect or circumventing the gaze of land masters while performing infractions against them. While one cow is usually slaughtered in November for winter food and its dried meat is consumed in spring, and one or two sheep are slaughtered during summer, in autumn, and in late winter, people commonly live on hunted meat. Previously, I mentioned that domestic animals are viewed as a gift allowing one to live. This view may account for the way in which livestock are slaughtered. Unlike wild animals which are shot with a rifle, livestock such as horses and cattle are frequently killed by striking the blunt end of an axe on their foreheads. The carcass is then divided up almost immediately and the portions of meat distributed. Similarly, on return to the encampment, hunters bring hunted wild meat directly into the outhouse and distribute it among extended relatives. By marked contrast, however, animal parts hunted for sale are generally not handled by women and are hidden by returning hunters in the bottom of their saddlebags and taken almost immediately to the district centre to be sold.

Before embarking on illegal hunting trips, men take care to ensure they do not draw direct attention to their actions. A conversation between two men, concerning the shooting of a male stag, indicates how reference to hunting is often disguised in people's speech:

> Hunter 1: People have said they have started to hear the stags singing again now. [Long pause] We have been east and west. [He pauses, and pokes at the fire.]
> Hunter 2: And?
> Hunter 1: [Long pause] They are there.

In referring to the stag's song, men indicate that the animal has moved near enough to their encampment for hunting to begin.

Hunting practices vary according to the animals being hunted and the time of year of the hunt. In the summer, when hunting for marmot, Renchin would usually leave the encampment on foot alone in the morning, and

[4] I should point out that hunting in the forest is also physically dangerous. Accidents occur often, animals attack people, and hunters may inadvertently shoot other hunters.

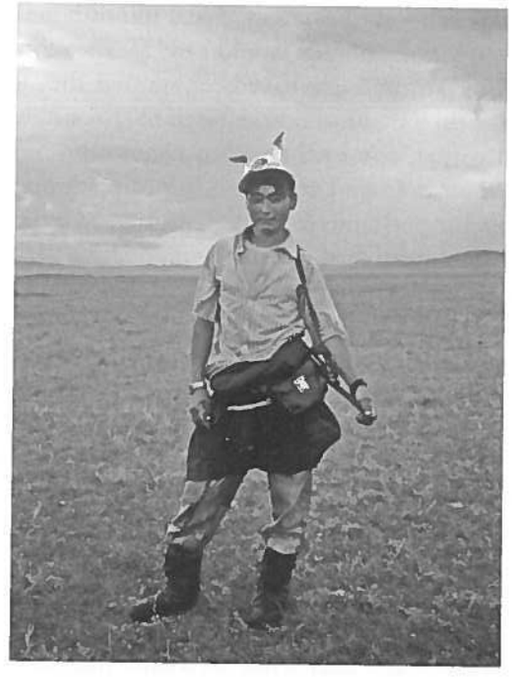

Figure 7.1 Marmot hunter.

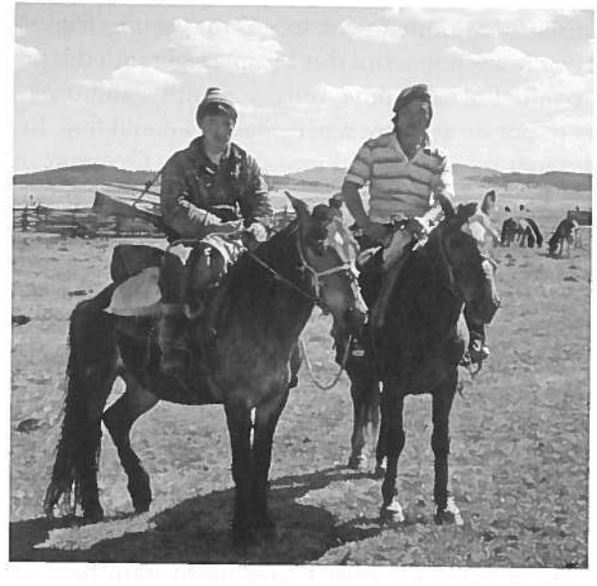

Figure 7.2 Setting off on a hunting trip.

return in the late afternoon or evening. When hunting for larger animals in the forest, however, a group of men would head for the mountains on horseback. Once an animal or its tracks have been spotted, they leave their horses and follow the trail on foot, until near enough to shoot it. In contrast, in the late autumn and winter, two or three men may go on horseback into the mountains with their dogs and set up a small camp, sometimes for several months at a time. One person remains at the camp and looks after the horses while the others go out on foot from the camp. Once they have found the tracks of an animal, with the help of their dogs they follow the trail. Finally, when they get within range, the animal is shot. When hunting for sale, rather than for consumption, the hunter who kills the animal quickly approaches the carcass and makes sure he only takes the particular parts required. He then swiftly puts the animal 'back together' and leaves the dead animal for the wolves. Disguising the hunt in this way, men strive to avoid being fined by the local forest rangers and divert attention from land masters who would be angered by their violent acts. In contrast, when hunting for household consumption, the carcass is cut into pieces and the parts that cannot be eaten are left behind. When killing certain animals for food, such as the small forest antelope (*göröös*), Renchin's sons explained that they sometimes consume the animal's blood just after it has been shot. Internalizing the potency of the animal in this way was held to benefit one's health and further increase one's hunting 'luck-fortune' (*hiimori*).

As a woman, I was not allowed to go on hunting trips. Nevertheless, Renchin felt that it was important that I gain insight into this practice, which he thought typified a masculine Buriad identity, and, one evening, he instructed me to put on as many warm coats as I could find. In the twilight, we walked through the shrubs and into the forest. On approaching a small river, Renchin found a spot where we could observe a small glen on the other side of the bank. Here, he said, wild boar came in the evenings to search for food. We lay there for several hours, whispering in hushed tones while looking out into the darkness with Renchin's gun poised. It became increasingly damp and cold. Not seeing anything for some time, we decided to go back to the encampment. The experience had not been strenuous, but I became ill the next day and began the ride to the district centre, where I was treated with boiled salty water and intermittent head massages while incense was passed around me, for several days. All this served to confirm to Renchin that women were really not meant to go hunting.

Given this very brief and unsuccessful insight into hunting, my knowledge of hunting is based on what I have heard from men. Indeed, when Renchin's three sons returned from hunting trips, some of which lasted for

a month or two and took them across the border into Russia, Delgermaa would pass incense smoke over them to cleanse them of any polluting influences from outside and we would feed them and listen to accounts of their trips. As they spoke we could only imagine the landscape that they had traversed—names and events conjured images in our imagination. During the summer and early autumn their guns, large knives, and equipment lay around the encampment, along with their four hunting dogs who guarded the young animal enclosure. Interacting with these dogs, I learnt that each of them was admired for the animals they had killed. Boroo and Bandgar had killed bear and wild boar, Sharai had killed a fox, and Laih had killed several stags. Observing their scars and injuries, these animals, like their male owners, had been to places and experienced things that we, as women, would never see.

Aside from forest rangers, who sporadically search the forest for hunters and fine them, the hunters also risk causing infractions against local land masters when they kill animals in the forest. Land masters are sometimes said to take the form of wild animals (Humphrey 2007: 185; see also Chapter 6), or the wild animals are said to 'belong' to the invisible land masters, as cattle do to men (cf. Broz 2007). Taking from the land masters, without giving something in return, might invite punishment. I learnt from an elderly Buriad man who visited us at the autumn encampment one afternoon that, when killing a wild animal, hunters sometimes recite the following words as a way to appease various spirits for taking the life (or breath, *am'*) of one of their animals:

> Tiger, Tiger, Tiger
> My arrogant, virile, captured loot
> Tiger, Tiger, Tiger,
> Fortune of the rich Hangai forest.
>
> (Dashsharav 2001: 15, my translation)[5]

Actual tigers (Siberian or not) do not inhabit these forests, but the tiger is considered to be a protector animal and is often found in drawings and embroideries in households where women may be living on their own.[6] Indeed, women warned me never to keep a picture of a tiger in my house when a man was living there, in case it caused the man to become like the tiger. When in the forest, however, hunters place themselves in a subservient

[5] *Bar, bar, bar / Bardam eriin olz / Bar, bar, bar / Bayan hangain hishig* (Dashsharav 2001: 15).

[6] See Diószegi (1968: 401) for tiger–hunter relations among the Nanai, where the tiger appears as a helper and protector animal who grants game to the hunter, although the Nanai word for tiger also means 'powerful' and 'great'.

position as they acknowledge that the land masters are the 'masters' of wild animals and attempt to thwart possible reprimands, which may affect those who remain at the encampment or cause the hunters misfortune while in the forest. Indeed, as among other Siberian peoples (Vitebsky 2005; Willerslev 2007), I was told that if a hunter kills many animals in one season, this could indicate that their hunting share was coming to an end and something bad could happen to them. It could even signal their approaching death.

Although women remain at the encampment and do not travel on hunting trips they are not disconnected from these activities. There is a strong sense that they do manage and attend to the hunters in the forest. While at home, women performed actions that managed the men's journeys. For instance, we did not clean the house for three days after the men had left, for to throw out sand, dust, or any rubbish from the house during this time would have been to block their paths across the landscape. Women also offer milk libations in the mornings to ensure journeys are successful. Ravens and other animals are observed as omens, and sounds produced by the fire are taken as signals about their passage (see also Shirokogoroff [1929] 1979). The ability to extend one's influence while remaining in one place is not limited to women and their husbands. Tsendmaa and her female friends often joked that they had whispered 'magical words' (*shivshleg üg*) on pieces of food, such as curds, which were offered to particular guests or relatives who they wanted to assist in their love affairs. While often oriented towards lovers, these acts could equally be used to bestow luck on a man about to leave for a hunting trip. Through such acts, women extended their sphere of agency beyond the home while remaining in place. When men return from a hunt, they distribute their meat in return for the care they have received from the women who have left their paths unblocked.

It is not just meat that men may bring home from their hunting trips. Bringing meat from outside into the home may also bring with it 'pollution' (*buzar*) which causes the dispersal of household fortune. Only while staying with Oyunaa did I realize that local sawmill owners, hunters, and people engaged in business and trade outside the encampment regularly checked to see if it was safe for them to carry out particular activities and that they were cleansed of any pollution. In Chapter 2, for instance, we saw that sawmill owners, hunters, and miners annually make offerings to the local land masters at the *ovoo* ceremony as a way of establishing themselves as the rightful custodians of the land. And yet, frequent encounters with unknown places mean that these people have to take precautions to guard against pollution which they might incur as a result of their journeys and actions. The way in which hunting may affect those who remain in place can be

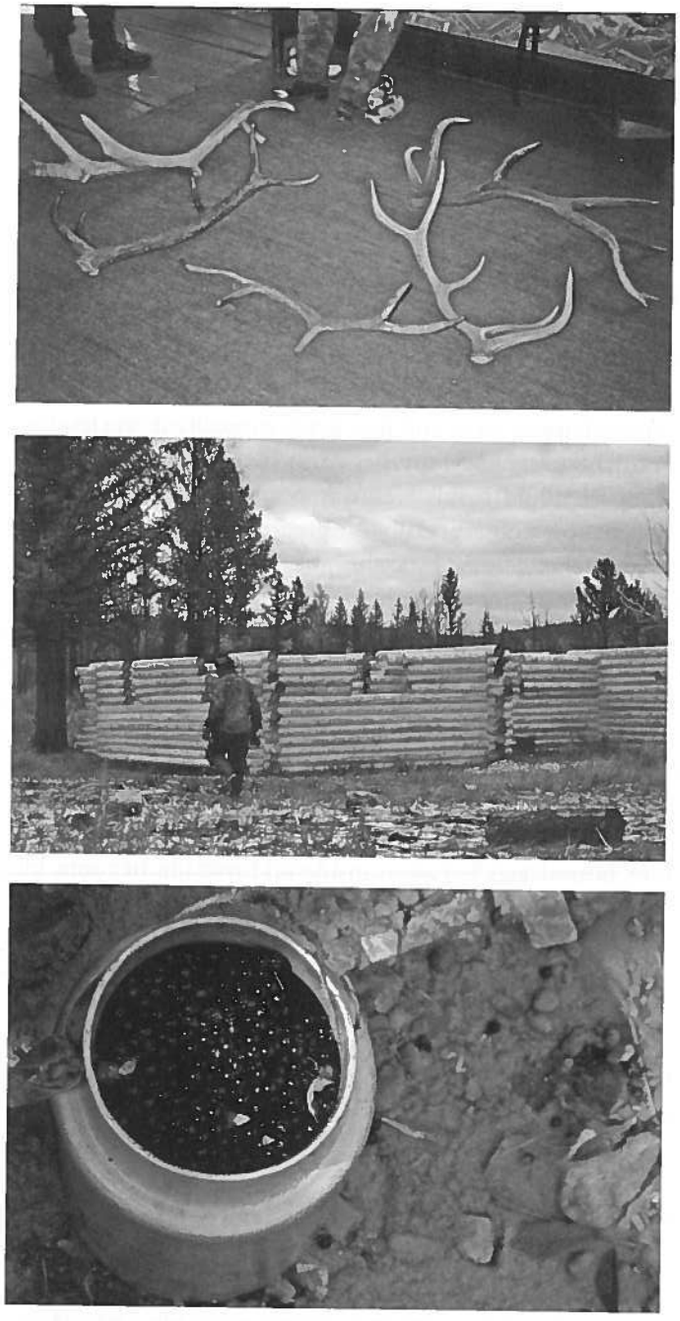

Figure 7.3 Antlers, houses, and berries for sale.

illustrated by an event told to me by Tsendmaa. One spring when she was pregnant, her husband went on several long hunting trips. In the forest, he accidentally woke a hibernating female bear with two cubs. The bear, angered at having been disturbed, attacked him but he managed to shoot it. As the cubs were too young to be left on their own, he was forced to kill them too. He returned to the encampment with the carcasses. By the early summer, Tsendmaa kept having 'black dreams' (*har darj züüdleh*) that there was a 'monster' (*mangas*) growing inside her stomach.[7] Consultation with Oyunaa during a divination revealed that the presence of the bear carcass and its cubs in the house had caused her to become polluted (*buzartai*). She explained: 'With one of the bear cub carcasses still hanging from the beams waiting to be sold to a trader, I knew that although my stomach kept swelling, something bad must happen to us and that it was probably going to affect me.' Six months into the pregnancy, she began to bleed. When this happened she realized that the child inside her was dead. The effect of male hunting practices on people and especially on pregnant women who remain at the encampment has been noted by anthropologists working in other parts of the world. Fausto (2007), for example, notes that in Amazonia '[g]estation is a creative and risky process, since the foetus may be attacked by the spirits of animals that its father has hunted or its mother has consumed' (Fausto 2007: 505). When Tsendmaa realized that her foetus was dead, she had an abortion in the provincial capital. On her return she said to me: 'It was a monster inside me, not a human. I am glad that it has left.' This account signals one of the many ways in which actions outside the encampment are perceived to affect those who live some distance from where those actions have taken place. Here, boundaries between inside and outside become blurred and thresholds disturbed.

In Siberia, and arguably among the Buriad too, the predation of wild animals has been noted as a kind of seduction whereby the hunter has to trick the land masters into *giving* an animal to them (Willerslev 2007). Once the animal is captured, the hunter then has to transform the wild animal into non-polluting and consumable meat (cf. Fausto 2007). Failing to do so may affect those in the household. It is not just the meat that they return with that may be considered polluting. Bulag (1998) has noted that among Mongols anyone who has left the home and travels to varied places may be 'regarded as polluted' (Bulag 1998: 263). It is often necessary to 'cleanse' these people

[7] Bad dreams are held to alert a person to some misfortune they are bearing, such as a curse. In order to prevent these from occurring, on waking people take a bowl of cold water, spit into it, and then throw it outside, thereby ridding themselves of its prophecy.

before they enter the encampment, especially if young children or pregnant women are around. It is perhaps not surprising that child-bearing women are considered vulnerable to such pollution. While hunters move between the forest and household encampments, women also move across different kinds of domains that render them vulnerable. As affines, young women move from their natal family and are placed among their in-laws (Chapter 4). In relation to this, Humphrey with Onon (1996: 301–5; see also Humphrey 1993) refer to women's movements between groups as the 'road of blood' as women contribute 'blood' in the form of children to their in-laws. In such a way, a woman is seen to come 'from outside to augment her husband's group, and ensure its increase' (Chabros 1988: 34). As we saw in Chapter 4, the daughter-in-law is both a 'piece', extracted from somewhere else, and a potential container. They are parts of their in-law's households while also being external to them (Empson 2003). In previous chapters, I noted that it is mostly women who tend to and change the form of the household chest. Acts of carefully containing fortune ensure that a collective resource is passed on to their children. Such acts also go some way to achieving their own integration (or containment) within their husband's family. But in so doing, a woman is also expected to *conceal*, internalize, thwart, and restore any misfortune or pollution that may enter the house. In such a way, we may say that while women are expected to contain fortune for the household, they are also expected to house that which is 'un-housed' by others.[8] They are movable vessels that have the potential to gather income, thwart the effects of pollution, and contain fortune. It is important to note, however, that women do not embody this interstitial position all their lives. In this regard, Humphrey with Onon (1996: 170–1) have argued that among Mongols the female gender is not a life-long state. Post-menopausal women, for instance, have grown out of the liminal position of child-bearing women (Humphrey with Onon 1996: 171).[9]

[8] So that '[t]he [daughter-in-law's position] remains the *place separated from "its" own place*, deprived of "its" place. She is or ceaselessly becomes the place of the other . . . Without her knowing or willing it, she is then threatening because of what she lacks: a "proper" place' (Irigaray 1993: 10–11, italics in original).

[9] Among Daur Mongols, elder women, are 'not only identified with the very symbol of perpetuity of the patrilineal family but [are] also the agents of removal of pollution deriving from younger women' (Humphrey with Onon 1996: 171).

Forest fires and haunted miners

It is not just households that suffer when people take things from the landscape. Such activities can impact on people's lives in the district more generally. During the spring and summer of 2000, for instance, we had a bad drought (*gan*). At first people did not mention the fact that the grass was yellow, the ground had begun to crack, and small dust storms spiralled flirtatiously around corners of buildings and along empty riverbanks. Finally, however, reference to the fact that it was now a drought (Bur. *gan bolohno*) became a common way to end one's conversation. Owing to the extreme dryness, forest fires started to appear in the district as early as May. White smoke filled the morning skies, a burning smell hung ominously in the air throughout the day, and sometimes one would be able to see an orange glow rising from the horizon at night. From time to time a bell would sound from the district centre calling men and women to help put out the fires. 'Forest fires are unpredictable, they move fast, jump over rivers, and run across the steppe,' Handmaa, an elderly woman in the district centre, commented when we spoke about a forest fire which had laced the outskirts of the district centre one year.[10] Longing for rain permeated one's every activity. Meat became rotten and river water stagnant. Listless flies settled everywhere, and there were times when lighting a fire to cook a hot meal simply required too much effort in the heat.[11]

People had different ideas about why forest fires were occurring so frequently. Bat-Ochir's wife argued that 'It is because so many people took antlers from the forests and sold them to traders. There has also been a lot of hunting.' Intense forest fires could be attributed to careless hunters who sometimes leave their fires unattended in the forests. In contrast, a hunter mentioned that the fires had increased 'because the sawmill owner has grown rich and greedy and there has been extensive logging'. Aside from human

[10] Sometimes, when forest fires get close to a building, people deliberately light a controlled fire to create a burnt area (Bur. *tsuram tavih*) to stop the fire from spreading. Further, forest fires are said literally to jump over valleys to different mountain peaks, as the embers from one place travel in the wind and propagate a fire elsewhere, or lay dormant in the roots of trees in forests

[11] During such moments of apathy, Handmaa would mutter, 'They should call the shaman to do a ceremony to help put out the fires and bring us some rain.' And children, in moments of playful energy, would sing: 'Rain, rain please come, Russian baby please come' (*Boroo, boroo orooroi, Orsyn maanuu ireerei*). This ditty plays on the similarity of the words 'rain' and 'Russian'. It also evokes the idea that both 'rain' and a 'Russian baby' are unlikely to ever come. Chabros (1988) states that falling rain may be equated with 'grace' or 'fortune' (*hishig*). The phrase '*hemjeelshgüi ih hishig chin', hüseliin hur met buuj baihad*' (lit. 'Limitless grace, which has descended like the rain of [our] wishes') emphasizes this (Chabros 1988: 33).

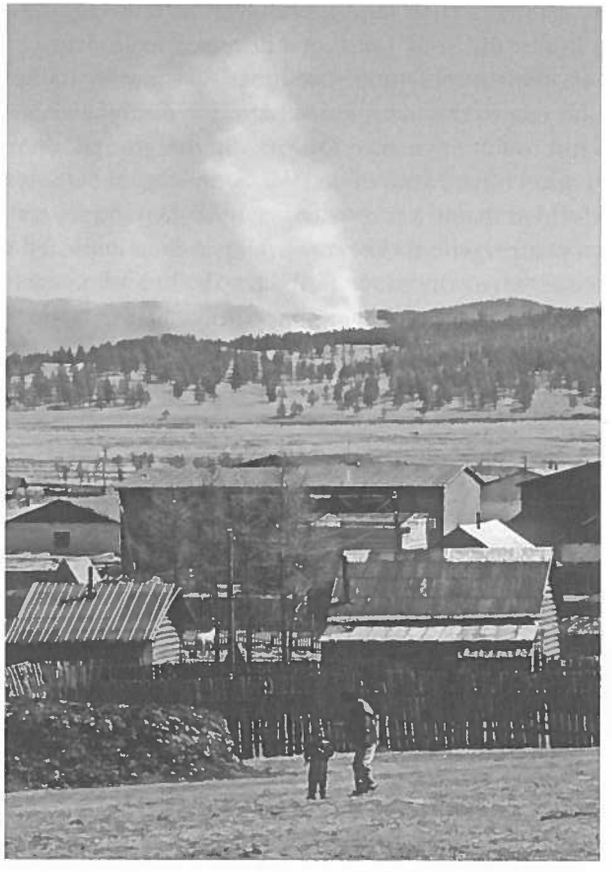

Figure 7.4 Forest fires lace the outskirts of the district centre.

agents, forest fires may also be viewed as punitive reprimands from invisible land masters. When I was walking with a shaman called Nergüi in the district centre one afternoon, he complained: 'There are so many forest fires this year because we are stealing gold from the mountains. They don't understand, the landscape here is very angry (*hilegnesen gazar*). The spirits of the water and land (*ongon sahius, lus savdag*) are angered that people are not worshipping the mountains properly.'

The agentive capacity of the landscape to affect those who live in it was not confined to forest fires. Deceased residents of Ashinga were said to haunt visitors who came to extract gold from the soil. A middle-aged woman who used to work as a nurse at the local clinic told me how several gold miners, drilling in an area to the east of the Onon River, had been visited, on more

than one occasion, by a strange-looking woman in a yellow coat. This woman was in fact the 'soul' (*süns*) of a deceased male shaman who let the tyres down on their trucks, prophesied that their family members were in danger, and bit one of the men's hands. At one point, she allegedly told the miners: 'Do not touch my nature. Do not dig the ground around here. You won't have a good time. None of you will return home.' Upon hearing this, the miners decided that it was time to leave. As they did so, one member of their group, a woman who had been working as their cook, fell unconscious and only awoke when the nurse in Ashinga's clinic drained her of 'black blood'. The miners never returned, but similar accounts circulated about archaeologists who have excavated large graves in the district, only this time they were haunted by swarms of locusts. In highlighting these accounts I want to stress that people do not see the land as some passive background setting or empty void. Through various events and encounters the landscape becomes something that acts on people in various ways. In the following, I turn to a specific occasion when local people attempted to glean information from the invisible land masters of particular places in order to gain legitimacy over the territory on which they currently live.

Figure 7.5 Local gold mine.

Shamans: movement across temporal domains

Land masters are often abstract, non-personified agents. For example, it is not always specified which land masters are associated with certain *ovoos*. At certain places, however, the land masters are personified as the souls of deceased people (see Humphrey 2001: 62). In Ashinga, these people are associated with its past residents, those who lived here before the Buriad arrived. The contrast between an abstract and a personified agent is often linked to Buddhist or shamanist perspectives. In an interview with a shaman from Ashinga, a Mongolian reporter quotes the shaman as saying:

> Shamans can get rid of bad things by soothing the 'spirits of the water and landscape' (*lus savdag*) [Tib. *Klu Sa bdag*]. They can relieve droughts by carrying out mountain rituals. There is an issue about understanding languages. A shaman does rituals in the Mongolian language for the rivers and mountains. However, yellow religion monks try to soothe the mountains and *ovoos* by reading Tibetan and Tangad sutras. Our land masters do not understand this. They are not soothed by readings in a foreign language; on the contrary, they get more and more furious. This is why there are droughts and cold winters (*zud*). (Shijirtungalag 2001)

Unlike Buddhism, which honours a host of abstract deities, shamanism provides people with a direct engagement with their ancestors and with the past residents of the place in which they currently live. While the Buriad have always made offerings to various land masters that reside in the landscape (see Chapter 2), local shamans are currently motivated to establish more direct relationships with them.[12]

It is important to stress that the revival and reinvention of shamanism in Mongolia is particularly prominent among the Buriad.[13] One may generalize that in an uncertain economic and social climate, people turn to shamanism as a way to establish who they are, by looking to the past and thereby differentiating themselves from others through certain practices.

[12] While shamans claim that at death they will go to Tenger, ordinary people may be reborn as other people, or they may transform into spirits (*ezen*) that reside in the mountains and rivers.

[13] Accumulating wealth in the neo-liberal economy has not prevented a rise in religious activities in the area. Far from it, capital gained from trade and hunting has increased religious activites, as they have throughout most of North Asia since the collapse of socialism. In comparison, Yang (2000) comments that in south-east China 'Local funds from the market economy have enabled lineages to reassemble their memberships, restore or build ancestor halls, revive ancient ancestor sacrificial ceremonies, and redraft their genealogies' (Yang 2000: 480).

Similarly, it may be argued that shamanic practices are valued because they make the landscape in which the Buriad currently reside into a knowable homeland and something familiar. Indeed, it has been noted that preserving connections with past people and objects often becomes more urgent in conditions of distress and trauma brought about by the forced relocation of communities from home to unfamiliar territories (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 42). Notwithstanding these different ideas, the Buriad in Hentii are quick to recall that the practice of shamanism persisted in this area, in a transmuted form, throughout the socialist period. It is widely known, for example, that in 1973, Renchinhand, a middle-aged woman living near the Onon River, walked into her paternal uncle's house, picked up a kitchen knife, and stabbed herself several times in the chest. Fortunately, the wounds were not fatal, but this terrifying act prompted her father to call on a man named Tsend who was rumoured to be able to communicate with ancestral spirits. At a secret gathering of elderly men, Tsend the shaman called on the spirit of the woman's deceased paternal grandfather who had been a shaman and asked what had caused her to act in this way. The deceased man replied that because he had not been given a proper shamanic funeral (*arangalah*) by his son (who had become the chairman of a party cell (*namyn üüir*) and the governor of a sub-district (*bagyn darga*)), and her family were not worshipping their ancestors (*ug udam*) in the correct way, his own status had been reduced to that of a 'servant', serving the shamans on the Island of Lake Baikal (where, according to myth, the highest-ranking Buriad shamans reside). As a result, the woman's younger brother was marked to continue the shamanic lineage (see Appendix B for a genealogy of this shamanic lineage).[14]

From 2003 onwards, events like these, where ancestors appeared to call on their living descendants, became more common and many people have started to become shamans. Narangerel, a woman in her mid-forties, for example, explained how she had come to be a shaman. In 1994, she explained, while crossing the street in Ulaanbaatar, her two young children were hit by a passing car, breaking their legs and causing head injuries. Her children recovered, but soon afterwards her teenage daughter fell ill. 'This was a disease sent by the spirits of the water and land (*husyn övchin*),' she explained.

> My daughter's skin was like a snakeskin. It developed blisters that circled up her body. She was in a lot of pain and couldn't wear any clothes. Gombojav guai [a local monk] read mantras and gave her incense and sacred spring water to cleanse her body and she recovered, but after this, in 1998, I was diagnosed with the third stage of ovarian cancer. I stayed in bed for three years receiving many treatments, such as morphine injections and chemotherapy, which burnt all my organs. During this time, an elderly woman from Dornod province [a province east of Hentii] advised me that I should begin to 'care for/carry my origins' (Bur. *ug barih*). She explained that I had an ancestor who had been a shaman, and they were trying to communicate with me. When I took my first level/exam (*chanar*), my teacher told me that I should become a bone-setter. I thought, how can I do this, I am so ill? But I became a bone-setter and now I am doing these things and I am healthy.

[14] A shaman is given a different kind of funeral to a lay-person. Traditionally, four poles were placed in the ground, with a platform constructed on top. The shaman's body was then placed on this platform. One might imagine that such a funeral was hard to perform during the socialist period without being noticed.

The idea that relatives, from the quite distant past, reach out to the living and demand attention is very different from the kind of relations established with deceased relatives through intra-kin rebirths (Chapter 6). Intra-kin rebirths are often confined to people with whom one once had a personal and often close relationship. Relations with shamanic ancestral spirits, by contrast, involve relations with people from the pre-socialist past whom one does not know personally, nor did one necessarily know of their existence before a shaman explained that they were related to you.[15]

When people visit a shaman they are asked to identify the name of their Buriad clan. We may recall that recording knowledge of this kind was something that was explicitly banned during the socialist period. Of course, just because written genealogies were looked down upon, this did not mean that genealogical information was not known, or recalled via oral means. Nevertheless, the socialist state, with its emphasis on egalitarianism, meant that people came to place little value on this kind of knowledge, if not actively oppose it as associated with a kind of life they had successfully left behind. While genealogical knowledge might have been useful when the Buriad first arrived in Mongolia in order to establish issues to do with inheritance and exogamy, many came to feel that this kind of knowledge was shameful and something to be discouraged or hidden. In order to be able to consult a shaman, however, it is crucial that people now identify links to a clan, through either the maternal or paternal line, so that the shaman may call on ancestors that are presumed to be related to the client. (For comparison with Buriad shamanism in a neighbouring province, see Buyandelgeriyn 2007 and Swancutt 2006, and in Siberia, see Jokic 2008). The practice of calling one's ancestral spirits is referred to as 'caring for' or

[15] Buyandelgeriyn (2007) notes that Buriad shamans have almost no origin spirits from the socialist era; most of them come from the distant past.

'carrying one's roots or origins' (*ug barih*). Caring for one's origins involves making offerings to ancestors to whom one is related, according to the shaman, and attending to their needs, desires, and wishes, so that one may ask their advice about current concerns. In this regard, Buyandelgeriyn has noted that attending to these distant and often unknown ancestral or origin spirits is a way of creating 'verbal memorials' of the past (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 135).[16]

In the past five years, a revival in such shamanic practice has erupted among the Buriad of Hentii. Increasingly, people feel a great moral obligation to attend to and care for their 'origins' in such a way. As we saw in the case of Narangerel, and the woman who stabbed herself, motivation to turn to these practices is often triggered by a series of unfortunate events, or traumas, which mean that people turn to the past for an understanding of who they are, or have become, in the present. When shamanic ancestors are first called upon at ceremonies, they are often angry and upset with their relatives and say they have been harming them because of being neglected. They chastise them for having neglected them for so long and tearfully lament that they are desperately hungry and thirsty (see Jokic 2008: 31).[17] The rise in shamanism has encouraged people to seek out a 'deep' genealogical past that is absent in the memory of most people. Failing to do so, it is said, might result in further misfortune and suffering.

While there has been an increase in this kind of activity, many people remain dubious of this surge in shamanism. Renchin, for example, was sceptical about the number of people becoming shamans. 'We have always had shamans, since a long time ago,' he explained, 'but we do not all need to be the shaman. Now we have so many shamans, lamas, and diviners. They are appearing just like mushrooms after the rain . . . this is becoming a big business and it is emptying people's pockets.' In spite of his scepticism, Renchin

[16] A similar interest in shamanism is occurring in Siberia, in the countryside and in cities, such as Ulan-Ude. Humphrey (1999: 5) describes these shamans as re-calibrating and re-chronologizing space and time, linking city with countryside, and the present to ancestral time. Jokic (2008) describes similar events among Buriad in the Aginski region in Siberia. He comments: 'The main inquiries [to shamans] that I heard were concerned with identity and forgotten genealogies. The *ongon* would ask the person their clan affiliation and place of birth and would provide an answer about who the person's ancestors are' (Jokic 2008: 38).

[17] In describing the revival and reinvention of shamanism among Buriads in Buryatia, Jokic (2008) comments that many of these shamans have Buriad teachers in Mongolia: 'Today, the Buriats are initiating themselves again thanks to their Mongol-Buriat brothers from the other side of the border' (2008: 44). 'Many individuals are experiencing shamanic sickness believed to originate from their deceased kin who are keen to make their presence "in flesh" among the living again' (Jokic 2008: 44).

and I visited a shaman's initiation ceremony, or exam (*chanar*, Bur. *shanar*), to the east of the Onon River in 2007. On entering the site of the initiation, we were asked to cleanse ourselves in sacred water and juniper smoke. As Jokic (2008) has commented for Buriad initiation ceremonies across the border in Siberia, the initiation is 'a collective event involving a (re)establishment of the well being of the kinship community' (Jokic 2008: 36). Various family members assist during the ceremony, which can take several days, as they help the initiate and prepare food and sacred offerings. Renchin knew many of the people at the ceremony and after we had cleansed ourselves we quickly found a tent in which to lay our overnight bags and a place to sit with some of the relatives as they tended to the initiate.

While we were there, Renchin approached the most senior shaman, a blind man whom he knew from the district centre and who was officiating the initiation, and asked him some questions. Having gone to the ceremony as a sceptic and in silence, Renchin could not stop talking about what the shaman had told him when we returned home a few days later. I note a fragment of this here as I think it draws attention to the value people place on historical knowledge that traces the 'origin' of why certain things are the way they are.

> [The shaman] said that Borhan bagsh [Buddha teacher] had an older brother and his name was 'something-black' and he was a shaman. While the Buddha-brother was meditating like a Dalai lama of that time, this older shaman-brother was explaining the reasons for his practices to people. The Buddha had many students who worshipped him. They were called Jandag [possibly referring to the term *Jindag*, Tib. *Byin Bdag*, meaning patron donor]. One day, his older brother came to see him and said 'all these people are worshipping you, can't you send some of your students to me?' The Buddha-brother did not agree. There is a river called 'Sharai gol', I think it flows near to northern China . . . The shaman-brother prepared seventy carts from wood. He also prepared seventy large pots for distilling alcohol. When he had made the alcohol in these pots, he used the carts to pour the alcohol into the Sharai gol as an offering, but he kept a small portion of the alcohol, the '*deej*' [sacred portion], for himself. Because of this, Sharai gol and Gangmuren River joined [the Yellow River and the Ganges]. Imagine how many people drink from these rivers! Slowly, all these people started to return to shamanism. Dalai Teacher [Buddha] came to see his shaman-brother and said, 'Not a single person is coming to see me now, please help.' The shaman-brother offered the sacred portion of alcohol that he had kept in a large bowl to his brother. Dalai Teacher's [Buddha's] religion prohibited him from drinking alcohol, so he didn't know what to do. It was a difficult decision for him because it was against his religion, but there was no one who was worshipping his religion. So he looked to the sky and saw Manjshir and Janraisag and Maidar gods. He

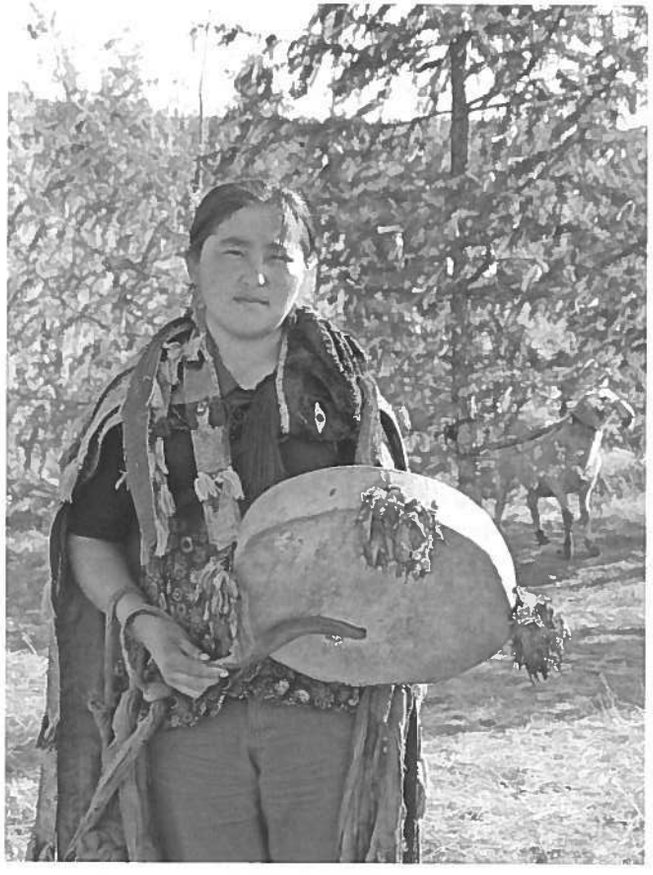

Figure 7.6 Initiate shaman.

> saw these three gods and they nodded their heads as if to let him drink. The shaman-brother offered him the drink and gave him half of his students. It was like a deal. This is the reason why on this side of the river, here in Mongolia, we have shamanism, and on the other side of the river, in China, they have Buddhism.

Renchin liked this story because it proved a point that he often liked to emphasize: the Buriad have a great and vast understanding of history. Because of this, he thought, shamanism might not be such a bad thing. Through their myths and legends, he exclaimed, people could recall knowledge that had been forgotten during years of socialism when such things were discouraged. The account by the shaman is, perhaps, also evocative of the way in which the Buriad present explanations as to why people are different or

Figure 7.7 Shaman preparing to call ancestral origin spirits.

similar in genealogical terms. As Humphrey has noted, when Buriads think in genealogical terms about their history, they do not do so unconsciously (Humphrey [1998] 2001: 50). As we saw in the myth about the runaway daughter (Chapter 1) and the swan-woman (Chapter 6), describing things in genealogical terms is a common way for the Buriad to mark out alliances and often provide a platform on which to highlight a wider moral.

Some, however, remained less convinced about shamanism. Renchin's younger brother, Dashdondog, like many others, claimed that shamanism was simply a new kind of emerging 'business'. Not unlike the way in which middle men from the city came to broker deals between hunters and anonymous Korean, Chinese, and European businessmen for illegally hunted animals parts, wooden houses, and other resources, so too did the shamans

appear to broker links between local people and their invisible ancestors, whom they did not know before, but to whom they handed over large offerings. Keeping in mind the idea of the shaman as a mediator—or 'broker'—between two parties who are invisible to each other, I turn now to focus on what kind of 'business' the shamans in this area are currently involved in. While the shamans' daily activities encourage people to tend to relatives from their pre-socialist past, this is not an area that I am going to dwell on in any great detail. Instead, I focus on how local shamans are themselves establishing new relationships with a different kind of pre-socialist Other.

When the Buriad first arrived in Mongolia in the early 1900s, they found the area along the northern Mongolian–Russian border sparsely populated. Before their arrival, however, people had lived in the region along the Onon River for many generations. The well-known Mongolian chronicle 'The Secret History of the Mongols' links this area with the birthplace of Genghis Khan (Chinggis Haan), and the area as a whole is associated with powerful ideas about the 'origin' or homeland of the founder of the Mongolian state. The landscape thus contains a vast imaginative terrain where politics of origins may be played out. In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising to find that the shamans claim that the landscape is in fact home to various kinds of 'past people' to whom they are not related.[18] Shifting their usual focus on connecting people with their ancestors, the shamans announced in 2005 that they had established relations with several ancient authority figures in the landscape who were of national importance, had sourced information about them, and had located crucial historical events as having taken place here.

In the following, we see how shamans deliberately position themselves in relation to nationwide interests to promote Mongolia's 'deep' past and the history of Chinggis Haan (about whom one was not allowed to speak positively during the socialist period). Many of the land masters (*gazryn ezed*) are not the parents or relatives of those who live here; rather they are held to take the form of well-known figures of Mongol statehood. In this sense, the Buriad can be said literally to live under the gaze of these ancient Mongolian authority figures. Shamans work hard to persuade these 'masters' of their legitimacy to be here, just as local politicians and educated elites work hard to justify their current placement as Buriads in Mongolia. By doing this, they gain blessings from previous inhabitants of the landscape, thereby legitimating their own position in Mongolia. It is in this context

[18] Narangerel, for example, explained that when 'I call the "master of the *ovoo*" (*ovoonii ezen*), they are nearly always the spirits of ancestral Halh shamans'. Other kinds of invisible agents, such as the spirits of rivers and places (*lus savdag*), are, however, identified as known people and sometimes relatives.

that we shall explore the practice of three shamans, who were together embarking on a kind of 'historical excavation' of the landscape through their ceremonies.

Establishing relations with pre-socialist Others

In the late summer of 2005, I travelled with a group of local friends to visit a sacred rock in a neighbouring district. On our journey we stopped, to the east of the Onon River, to visit a female doctor who had recently become a shaman. After drinking tea and exchanging news, she proceeded to take out her notebook and began to tell us about some of the historical findings that the 'local shamans' (*nutgiin böö nar*) had discovered in their communal ceremonies. Not unlike the practice of an anthropologist, she glanced at her sprawling notes held in a rather battered-looking notebook and recounted her findings for us. The invention and counter-invention of knowledge is an everyday activity for these shamans whose translators (*orchuulagch*) convey to anxious clients what their deceased relatives want as they speak through the shaman. And like the training of anthropologists, shamanism is here a formalized skill that involves a student-shaman learning from a teacher (*bagsh*), taking notes, and passing various exams, or levels (*chanar*).

I present, very briefly, three of the many episodes that were recounted to us that afternoon. First, the female shaman explained that, on New Year's Day, she had travelled with two other shamans to some local medicinal hot springs to make offerings (*tahilaa taviad*) to the mountain cairns, or *ovoos*. Near to the hot spring there is an *ovoo* called 'the stopping-place *ovoo*' (*zogsool ovoo*). Speaking through one of the Buriad shamans (lit. '*ongon oruulah*', for the spirit to enter the shaman), the spirit who resides at this place revealed that she is called Tsendem. When she was in her early twenties her body had begun to ache and she had visited the hot spring as a cure. After this, she became a student at a nearby temple and studied to become a female monk. When she died, she became the 'master' (*ezen*) of the *ovoo*. She informed the group that several of the *ovoos* in this area are currently located in the wrong places. She gave instructions to the group as to how they should be relocated. If these were not moved, she warned them, droughts would afflict the area and people would not prosper. As the shamans were about to stop their activities, the land master commended the shamans, saying: 'You are good people to be worshipping together in these mountains.'

The second 'finding' concerns the land master of another *ovoo* by the hot spring, referred to as the *ovoo* of 'perfect wisdom' (*bileg tögs*). The female

shaman recounted that the master at this *ovoo* was called Damdin.[19] Damdin explained that he was a descendant (*udmyn hüü*) of a great and powerful shaman who had been Chinggis Haan's personal adviser. He began to talk about Chinggis Haan and explained that he was a very polite man and was not particularly strict or ruthless. In terms of his appearance, Damdin explained that Chinggis had upward-pointing eyebrows and downward pointing eyes, his jawbone was wide, and he had a prominent nose with a dark face. The group decided to show the land master a picture of Chinggis Haan, whereupon he exclaimed: 'This does not look like Chinggis!' Damdin explained further that the group must relay his messages to different officials in order that the eastern provinces would flourish. The female shaman explained that, on another occasion, later in the year, while she was attempting to call on an ancestor (*ongon*) of a local Buriad family, the land master of a nearby *ovoo* (*sahüus*) had unexpectedly entered her and demanded that he be presented with his 'heroes'. The people were shocked and replied that they were not from his period; they had no idea who his heroes were, nor did they know how they might locate them. From these three short accounts, we gain an immediate sense that the shaman's activities reveal a new historical perspective of the landscape, as people from the past appear from its contours and crevices. In this performative mode, moving between near and distant time periods to create relations, characters from the past are not confined to textbooks read only by the educated elite. Rather, these characters are made to appear in the present and comment on people's current activities. Here, the pre-socialist past is not one of distanced objectivity. Rather, the past that is evoked through the performance of the shamans is a source of imaginative potential.

Lambek (1998) has commented that '[b]ecoming possessed is a kind of mimetic surrender to history' (1998: 113). In spite of the fact that the term 'possession' fits uneasily with the practices I describe because the shaman is both the one who invites the deceased in and the vessel by which they are made to appear, we may ask *whose* history the Buriad shamans are surrendering to when they evoke these historical figures. The historical figures that the shamans speak of are individuals who belong to other people's pasts—to a past well before the Buriad came to live here. Given their contentious historical link to the place in which they live, it is interesting to note that it is only now, some time after the end of socialism, that local shamans feel it is important that they attend to the wishes and

[19] In Tibetan, Damdin, or 'Rta Mgrin' (Tib.), is a tantric deity with a horse head (pers. comm. Hildegard Diemberger).

demands of these past people so that they can live and prosper in this place.[20] In recasting history in this way, we may say that the Buriad are creating a new future for themselves. As they root themselves to the landscape by placating its past inhabitants, they gain knowledge of the past which becomes a kind of tool for the present. Indeed, many of the demands suggested by the shamans have been relayed to local officials who have acted on their wishes.

But what does the otherness of these historical figures imply for the power relations between the Buriad and the past they evoke? A similar scenario has been described by Lambek (2002). Nuriaty Tumbu, the Mayotte spirit medium, usually attends to the spirits of her own family. Suddenly, however, she began to take on the spirit of 'the Sultan', an ancient authority figure of national importance but with no kinship connections to her and who spoke an ancient dialect that was not her own. Lambek (2002) argues that Nuriaty Tumbu's shift resonates a wider shift in the community at large, where people were turning away from a focus on the support of their kin. Projecting herself to a wider audience, Nuriaty Tumbu's new spirit was an attempt to reach beyond her own past at a time when various socio-political changes threatened to marginalize her and people like her. The spirit medium's shift signalled a historical consciousness that reflected wider political concerns.

I think we can identify a similar motivation among the shamans I have been describing. Here, the Buriad shamans' extended their focus from a concern with locating people's deceased ancestors, to the history of the land in which they currently live. In order to locate themselves in their current surroundings, they turned to varied historical figures who are imagined to have lived in this place before their arrival. This drive to capture knowledge of the past resonates with a wider change in historical consciousness among the Buriad and Mongolians more generally. Part of the motivation for revealing to others that they had made contact with these historical figures can be seen as a drive to engage with wider political concerns that were present at a time when new icons of authority were being sought in the national consciousness. In June 2005, the Mongolian government announced that it would provide economic assistance to the district in preparation for the 800th anniversary celebrations of the proclamation of Temujin as Chinggis Haan and the establishment of the Mongol state. The money would go

[20] In the 1930s, shamans in western Buryatia had similar figures called 'Mongols', who they said inhabited the Lake Baikal region before the Buriad settled there. These figures were associated with ancient objects they had left behind called '*buumal*', such as arrow-heads, etc., (pers. comm. Caroline Humphrey).

towards the establishment and promotion of a 'Chinggis Trail', to include visits to places identified as his birthplace, coronation site, and other historical locations.

At the time, the shamans were keen to reveal that they had located some of these historical figures and had sourced important information about them, that could contribute to wider national interest in Mongolia's 'deep' pre-socialist past. In such a way, they became local spokespeople for ideas currently being promoted in the wider historical consciousness. We may say that while historical associations had previously been conferred on the district from outside (cf. Bulag 1998: 25), people inside the district were beginning to utilize this wider historical interest to their own advantage. It appears that the shamans were skilfully intertwining the personal and the public, the moral and the political, as they dovetailed their activities with nationwide concerns. Because the historical legacy of this landscape is well known, the shamans' prestige would be heightened if they were able to establish relations with some of the better-known historical figures in this area (particularly in the period leading up to the 800th anniversary celebrations). Here, the shamans benefited from 'colonizing' relations with historical figures in particular parts of the landscape. Local officials in the area were well aware that this focus on their province was something to be utilized. Indeed, being roughly of the same age group as the now well-trained local shamans (that is, those with six or seven exams), local officials were keen to promote this unique knowledge to others. Signs were erected marking particular places as being of historical importance, and sites of worship were relocated according to the shamans' findings.

Despite this wider political interest, the shamans also claim that they are obliged to act according to the demands made by spirits in their ceremonies. Like Foucault's description of the panopticon and the permanent visibility that it bestows on its subjects (Foucault 1977), the female shaman explained that 'for the spirits, our lives and actions appear as on a computer screen. They tell each other everything that is happening; they can even hear us talking with each other now.' Being subject to such permanent surveillance, people's actions are constantly being judged and observed by the landscape's previous inhabitants. Earlier, I mentioned that the concept of landscape in Western thought has been greatly dominated by the perspective of European landscape painting. Here, the painter is an eye looking at the world from a position outside it. In the case I have outlined, the landscape is very far removed from simply being the passive recipient of a single gaze. Instead, there is a symmetry between people as objectified by the gaze of multiple land masters who live in particular places, while at the same time being

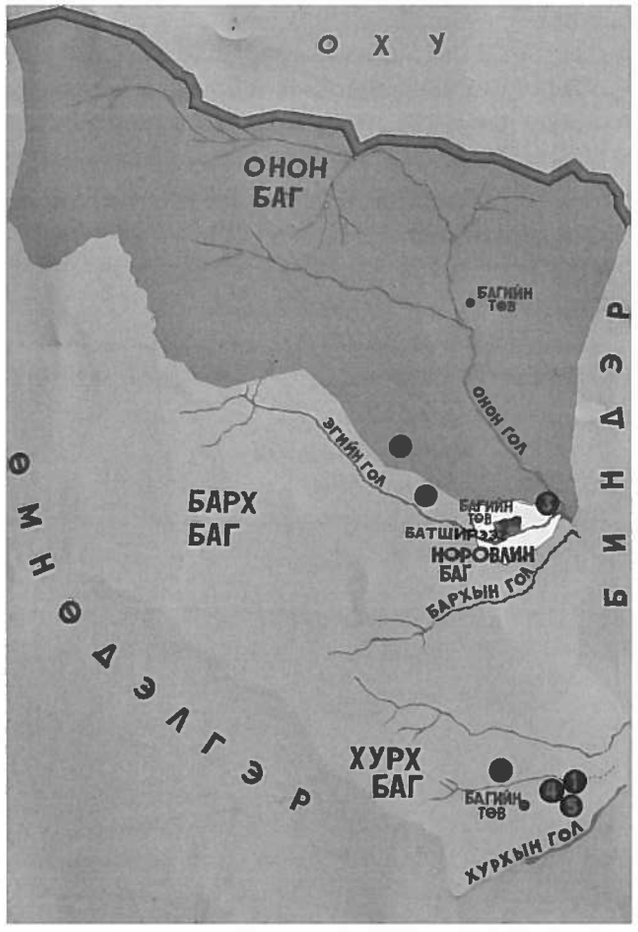

Figure 7.8 Sign indicating places of historical importance.

subjects who translate the demands and intentions of these spirits to others. The shamans who claim relation with these land masters stress the need to honour and attend to those who lived here before. At the same time, through their rhetoric, they objectify these past people as different from themselves and as powerful agents that need tending to. One may say that, through this, they give a face to the Other that circulates in their territory and lives in their midst (cf. Chapter 4), transforming them into knowable subjects. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, being able to argue that these past figures of national importance have endorsed them as 'good' people who should remain here, the Buriad gain a voice of authority that can contribute

to current decision-making processes that control the landscape's resources. By mapping an image of the landscape that is peopled with different historical agents of national interest, the shamans are able to engage in wider debates about who can claim ownership over the land. Here, we see that knowledge of the land's past becomes a kind of moral authority by which the Buriad legitimize their own position in a particular place.

It is worth noting that the political dynamics of these claims are different from those encountered among indigenous Siberian groups in Russia. The Buriad have not, as yet, claimed an 'indigenous' status with regard to land claims in relation to the Mongolian state, although they are, of course, allotted shares of land in the district centre, and rights over winter pastures, as Mongol citizens. Indeed, as we have seen in this chapter, they sometimes deliberately disengage from their ethnic minority and immigrant status in order to identify more closely with Mongolia as a nation. In turn, more elite members, such as local government officials, their wives, and relatives, sometimes benefit from deals with outsiders, granting access to resources, such as mines, in return for private rewards and shares. In this light, there are no fixed distinctions between 'us' and 'them', but different registers and discourses working alongside each other which people take up at different moments. Nevertheless, as their current authority is contested by various claims to resources, such as gold and national parks which threaten their ability to move in the district, people stress the need to assert themselves as the rightful guardians of this place. Articulating heretofore-unknown knowledge about its past inhabitants, the Buriad redefine their own legitimacy in it. In so doing they engage with the pre-socialist Other that haunts their territory. In documenting and distributing this knowledge, people in Ashinga navigate their own positions in relation to wider national concerns that question their place in Mongolia as a country.

This chapter has shifted the focus from relations based on households to some of the ways in which people forge relations with the landscape. Rather than see this as an empty void that enables movement to various fixed points or centres, people are forced to attend to a differentiated and stormy landscape in order that they may continue to benefit from it. While young men hunt in the forest to gain an income from passing traders, who are the representatives of invisible businessmen in the city, local shamans spread information about the needs and demands of invisible past people who are held to live in their vicinity. Here, the landscape appears to provoke people, urging them to craft their own positions in relation to it. By circulating information about people from the landscape's pre-socialist past, the shamans create a 'historical map' of what the landscape may have looked like before

their arrival. In creating such a map, they gain some authority over an unknown past that legitimates their current presence. These enactments are, then, not about positioning oneself in relation to a known past. Instead, they generate new co-ordinates, or nodal points, in a landscape where the pre-socialist past lies outside these people's own history and memory. In so doing, they go some way in forging their own positions in this place anew. In the following chapter we see how arson may be viewed as a further materialization of the Buriad's ambivalence towards the place in which they currently live.

Figure 7.9 The winner.

8

The Ambiguous Power of Fire and Sites of Accumulation

In late September 2005, I stayed for a few days at a house in the district centre while waiting to return to the countryside. One night, I was woken at around three in the morning by the sound of people shouting and the smell of smoke. I got off the floor where I had been sleeping on a mattress with my friend Tsendmaa and her young daughter and looked outside to see large billowing orange flames reaching up into the night sky. The neighbour's wooden house was on fire. We threw on whatever clothes we had to hand and clambered over the fence that divided our yards. The heat from the fire hit our faces. Adjusting our eyes to the glare, we saw that some men were already at the scene and were in the process of manoeuvring a large wooden chest out of one of the windows. Not long after this, the roof collapsed and the whole building burnt to the ground. Although a terrifying event, no one was hurt in the fire and it was not thought to be particularly unusual, for this was the fifty-fifth fire in the district centre in the past nine years.

The following day, the site was cleared. Apart from the foundations, nothing was left of the building but an empty space contained within a wooden fenced enclosure. An attempt maybe to conceal the fire's destruction. But things could not be erased so easily. Knowing looks and whispers were exchanged by those who passed outside the small kiosk owned by the people whose house had burnt down. Apart from some children who went in to buy things for their parents, few people actually approached or said anything to the woman standing behind the counter. With her husband away, the woman had chosen to sleep in her shop with her children the night before. The house had been empty. Speculation mounted: had they brought the fire on themselves through some feud? Back at my friend's house, neighbours gathered over tea for the chance to reflect on the previous night's events. Worried that the arson would spark off a string of attacks, Tsendmaa

turned to me as I entered the house and said: 'My brother told me that I should guard my parents-in-law's house. I will have to stay there now. Houses without people (*ezengüi*) are being targeted.' Finding a stool to sit on, I listened to them talking. One of the men who had helped at the fire the night before said: 'The reason it burnt so quickly is because the house is made of wood without bark.' Another man commented: 'Well, access to the house was easy. The people who live on the eastern side are away at the moment and no one was actually in the house last night.' Visibly scared, the three men who had climbed through the window of the burning house to retrieve the household chest and carpets went over the previous night's events in detail. One of them remarked: 'I don't know how I was able to lift the whole chest out of the house by myself, it seemed so light.' While these kinds of comments continued, everyone, however, refrained from discussing in any detail who or what may have caused the fire.

A few days later, two policemen arrived from the provincial capital to examine the site. As they pulled up in their jeep outside the yard, Tsendmaa and I climbed on to the fence and peered over the top. We watched as they circled around the now immaculately cleaned site and, every so often, crouched down to examine the ground beneath their feet. They returned to the jeep and drove off. We jumped down from the fence, knowing that there was no way these people could elicit any information that we did not know already. In the afternoon, Renchin's youngest son arrived with a horse and asked if I wanted to return to the countryside. I agreed. Before leaving with him, I stopped at the office of the governor (*zasag darga*), a man called Baatar. Sitting opposite him at his desk, I exchanged a few words with him about the latest fire. Baatar pressed the point that people needed to be able to insure (*daatgali*) their houses. Looking past each other, we both knew that this suggestion was simply being put forward because an official suggestion was needed at this moment from a person in his position.

I thanked him for his time and raised myself from my chair as if to leave. While doing so, I noticed that he was reaching forward with his hand towards a document on his desk. He gently pushed it towards me. The governor then stood up and asked me to wait for a moment while he went outside to tend to something. I leant forward and looked down at the document in front of me. It was the official list of all the arson attacks that had happened in the district since 1997 (*galdan shataah üül ajillagaand orson*, lit. places where the procedure of setting fire has been started). I quickly noted details from the list: in 1997, twelve buildings were attacked; in 1998, sixteen. The number then tailed off with three in 1999, none in 2000, and one each in 2001 and 2002. In 2003, the number of arson attacks on

buildings jumped to thirteen, but tailed off again with five in 2004 and four in 2005. Against each occurrence was the name of the building's owner, its location in the district centre, and how much damage the fire had caused. If the building had not burnt to the ground, notes as to which side of the building the fire had started on were marked, along with information as to possible means by which the fire had been started. The governor returned. I looked up from his desk. We exchanged a few innocuous words and I left the government building. With great relief I rode out on horseback from the district centre with Renchin's youngest son, away from the conflict it contained.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, we saw that the household chest provides a site that brings together people who are dispersed and separated from each other throughout the year. In Chapter 6, I attempted to show how this view of the chest could be applied to the concept of the person as people gather one another into themselves through intra-kin rebirths. In contrast to the seasonal movement of people and animals in the countryside, and the temporal movement of people across generational time spans, when physical movement ceases fortune and wealth becomes visible in people's elaborately constructed wooden houses (rather than mobile felt tents and wooden structures in the countryside). The district centre, and its houses, may be viewed as analogous to the household chest or person. As sites or gathering points, these houses are the extensions of the people to whom they are attached.

In this chapter I focus on acts of sabotaging, destroying, and burning down houses in Ashinga's district centre. Attacks on buildings through arson dislocates people (in both a physical and metaphorical sense) from their material possessions and severs social relations. These acts of separation, it is claimed by some, are partially prompted by jealousy as people question the morality of each other's new means of accumulating wealth in the neo-liberal economy and point to disputes to do with ownership and inheritance.[1] Wider social uses of fire point to the general idea that fire in Mongolia is a means of purifying oneself from polluting influences which are often seen to come from 'outside'. For example, fire is viewed as something that cuts off, separates, purifies, and cleanses people from maleficent beings, such as after they have been to a funeral. The polluting influence that arson attempts to cleanse people of is, I suggest, the seeming immorality of

[1] This is not to present a view of the life of nomadic herders as being without certain tensions. My aim in Chapters 4 and 7 was to show through a focus on hidden pieces in the household chest and invisible agents in the landscape that different kinds of tensions exist for those who live in the far countryside.

people's new means of accumulating wealth and power. In burning down someone's house, the act of arson separates people from their private property and marks their difference from others in the community. In this sense, the use of fire may be viewed as a 'detoxifying agent' (Bulag 1998: 264), in the face of what is perceived to be the polluting influence of unequal accumulation of wealth. Arson therefore operates within Buriad modernity as a means by which people dislodge or purify aspects of the person that are viewed as immoral.

I also suggest that people use fire to cleanse themselves of the socialist past and set the scene for a new way of engaging with each other and the place in which they live. On the one hand, this ambiguous relation to fire may be viewed as a continuation of the uncertain terror and destruction experienced by the Buriad during the socialist period. In this sense, the fear which arson currently produces is the manifestation of a longer-standing sense of uncertainty and fear that the Buriad have had to live with over many years. This uncertainty is explored in relation to the idea that the enemy or the source of destruction may not always be attributed to an outside power, such as the Soviet or Mongol socialist state, but also exists within. Different ways of understanding the cause of arson rest on different regimes of visibility that involve policing the boundaries of what is seen and by whom. In this sense, arson may be viewed as the visible crest of various tensions that have been brewing. The chapter aims to evoke the sense that it is impossible to contain explanations for the act of arson in a single narrative or explanation. This mirrors the experience of people in the district centre. Rather than identify a single cause for the attacks and attempt to stop them, people view the threat of arson as persistent, thereby perpetuating a necessary distance between people in their relations with each other.

The district's centre

The district centre provides the main administrative facilities for those who live in the district. The government building, bank, school, post office, cultural centre, various shops, and clinic are all located here. Those who work for these institutions live here on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. Along with these employed people, many elderly people live in the district centre, perhaps because they are too old to assist with tasks essential to their families who live as herders in areas surrounding the district, or because they are needed to look after grandchildren and other relatives' children while they attend school during term-time. They often inhabit the houses that

they lived in during the socialist period, when they were employed, for example, as book-keepers, accountants, storehouse-attendants, and school teachers. Several religious specialists also live here, although they may be absent for certain times of the year as they travel to cities or to other districts to meet with people, officiate at shamanic exams, or gather herbs and plants from the forests for medicinal use. Young couples engaged in various entrepreneurial activities, such as trading in food or clothes, tend to live in the district centre on a semi-permanent basis (see Chapter 4), along with several middle-aged women who run the kiosks and shops.

As a way of distinguishing where one lives, people refer to themselves as living in the 'east side' (*züün tiish*) or 'west side' (*baruun tiish*), or behind or in front of the school or government building and post office, which are in the centre. Different ethnic groups and extended Buriad families have traditionally inhabited different areas in the district, thereby maintaining clusters of areas in the district centre where men who are related to each other live. This distinction is also a product of the old socialist administration system, whereby the Buriad in Ashinga worked for the co-operative and lived in the south and west of the district, and the Halh Mongols, who were brought here in the early 1960s from western Mongolia, worked for the sawmill, located to the north and east of the district centre (Tsoloo 1982; Tserenhand 1987). Alongside these divisions, extended relatives form clusters of houses within fenced enclosures in particular parts of the district. Some of Renchin's extended family, for example, and other Hori Buriads (whose relatives also live in the same area as Renchin in the countryside), live in the west of the district near the Eg River. Hudir and Tsongool Buriads, who inhabit the countryside along either side of the Onon River to the north of the district, tend to live in the north of the district centre, and the few remaining Halh families live in the far north-east. In addition to those who live here permanently, the district centre is also a hub for those from Ashinga who no longer live here. Those who work in the capital city, or the local mining town of Bagan Nuur, sometimes contribute funds for particular celebrations and events in Ashinga. As noted earlier, in the autumn of 2001, when the local administration could not afford to open the school, the governor successfully appealed for financial help from a group of Ashinga people in the city (*nutgiin zövlöl*). Scaling outwards, the district centre, like *ovoo*s on mountaintops and household chests in people's homes, may be imagined as a centre to which people, dotted around the countryside or in cities, are attached. Within this centre people are tied to particular houses, which become a focal point for extended relatives when they visit from the countryside or cities.

Unlike houses in the countryside, houses in the district centre remain fixed in place and it is people who move between them.[2] This concept of the house as a gathering point for an extended group of people means that people often refer to houses in the district centre as 'our house' (*manai ger*), even though they may actually live some distance from it. Like the older centric view of Buriad genealogical diagrams, the district centre and its houses are a central point to which people flock from scattered places in the countryside. People living in the district centre have relatives who live in the countryside and from whom they receive milk, cream, and meat. During the summer months, many people from the district centre leave their houses to live with relatives in the countryside. There is thus a constant movement between the centre and the changing constellation of homes and activities in the countryside. Study of children's drawings depicting where their homes are points to the idea that before seven or eight years of age, children see their home as distributed in multiple locations, and often not in the house where they currently live (Empson 2003). This, of course, may be due to the fact that many children live in the district centre on a termly basis while their parents are located elsewhere, often in the countryside or part-time in cities. Nevertheless, we should not gloss over the fact that Soviet policy forced many to settle in the district, thereby creating a new kind of 'house-based society' (*sociétés à maison*) (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 6) whereby people reside in fixed places, rather than moving annually to different seasonal encampments (in the countryside, or from the town to the countryside).

Houses in the district centre can be viewed as agentive artefacts, that is, structures that project the status of the people who are attached to them (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: Bachelard 1994). Because these houses are permanent structures, they tend to be more elaborate than wooden houses in the countryside. Most have an entrance porch on the south-east side of the house, which is used for storing wood and sleeping in the summer when the main room of the house is too hot. As people gain new kinds of wealth, however, different kinds of houses have emerged with elaborate extensions, second storeys, and balconies. Like the artefacts displayed on top of the household chest (Chapter 3), houses are deliberately attended to so that they may create an effect on the people who look at them. New extensions, innovative outhouses, vinyl flooring, and curtains flaunting exotic beach

[2] While more stationary than felt tents (*ger*), simple houses are generally made without nails and can be taken apart in a short space of time and moved to a new location, such as the provincial capital or a city if necessary.

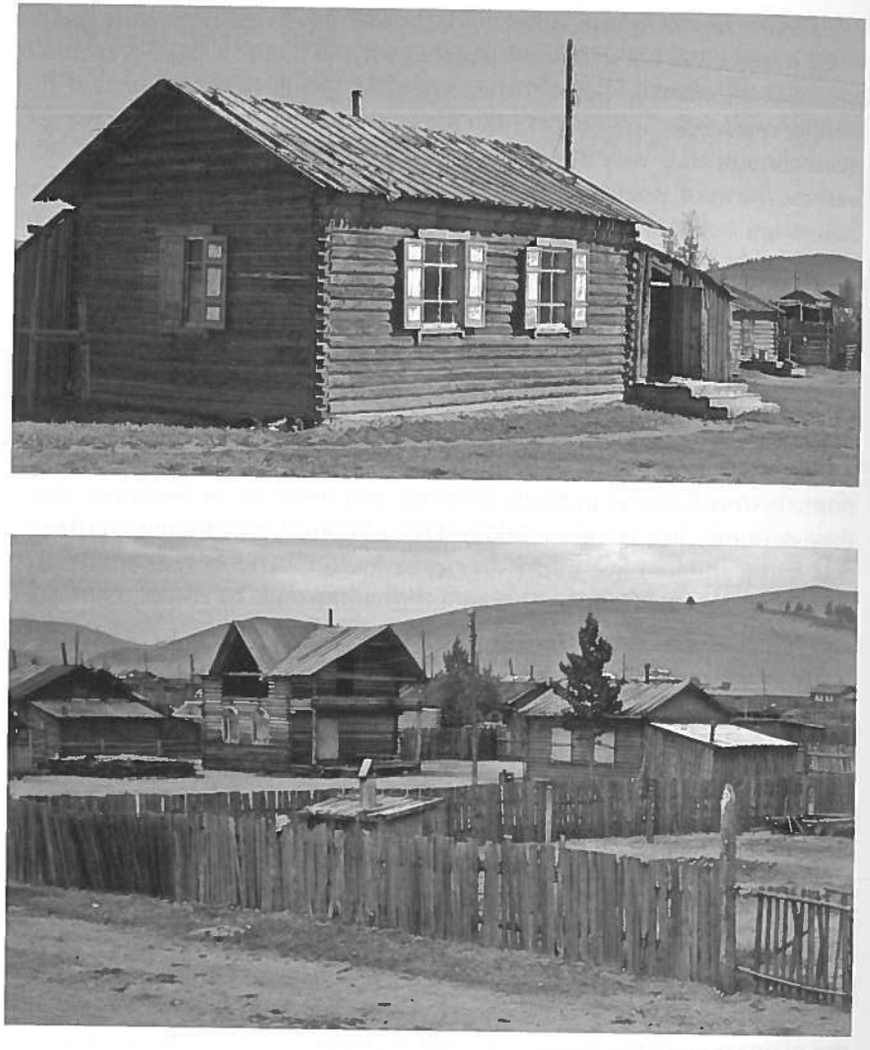

Figure 8.1 Old and new houses and shops in the district centre.

scenes in fluorescent colours with palm trees, or posters depicting Western-looking couples in scantily clad embraces, for example, index the capacity of people to acquire such forms. In short, houses in the district centre grow in size and style in relation to the people who live in them. Seen in this light, we may talk of a house in the district centre as an 'extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect' (Carsten and Hugh-Jones

Figure 8.1 (cont.)

1995: 2). Houses are the means by which people display to others, through innovative extensions and additions, their ability to accumulate economic wealth and social prestige.

The ability to build wooden houses is a source of great pride for the Buriad, who, unlike other Mongolians, have built wooden houses for several generations. Men in Ashinga now build these desirable structures for people in other parts of Mongolia, who send large trucks to collect them. Through such sales, young men may earn enough to build their own house when they marry and register themselves as household owners with the local administration. A small ritual act is conducted for a new house, whereby, among other things, a ceremonial silk scarf is placed in one of the beams of the house, ensuring prosperity for those who live within it. Regardless of

their outward appearance, the interior layouts of district centre houses are very much the same as those in the countryside. The house generally consists of one room, with the hearth at its centre, the household chest at the rear, and the eating area near to the door (on the south-east side). Sometimes a half-length screen is erected to divide the sleeping area and household chest from the eating area and the stove in the centre. This conceals part of the household interior from visitors. Hearths are often made of bricks and sand gathered from the west of the district, and include a small oven for baking bread. It must be said that wooden houses are also common in the countryside, and because the Buriad have always lived close to forests, many lived in wooden houses well before the socialist period.[3] As mentioned in Chapter 3, these structures are different because even though they remain in place, parts of the house such as the door, the roof, or window frames are used to create different structures at different seasonal places. The wooden house in the countryside therefore takes on a mobile quality with some of its constituent parts being dismantled and moved to new locations.

In terms of activities that take place outside the house, residents of the district centre collect water from the river, and wood for cooking fires and heating from the forests surrounding the district. Some people have dug wells within their fenced enclosures, and their neighbours may also draw water from them. Although houses are situated within enclosed yards, people pass in and out of each other's enclosures to get to the river, or as a shortcut to different parts of the district. Children rush between different enclosures to play, grandmothers gather to play cards, and men can be found sitting along enclosure fences drinking and talking in the shade. Nevertheless, while some people can always be seen out and about, many people prefer to keep in their neighbourhoods or their enclosures. Such people tend to visit other people's houses only rarely, and therefore meet outside the house, at the river while collecting water, at the post office, or on the way to school or the government building. A visit to someone living on the other side of the district may take all day, not because it is particularly far, but because the visitor will be treated to tea and maybe food, with all the formal etiquette of hospitality that this entails. People rarely know what the interiors of each other's houses look like, unless they share a fenced enclosure or live close by. When a neighbour needs to borrow some sugar, a mug of flour, or some money to pay for school books, they will often send their children on

[3] In the past, among Buriads in Siberia, it was common for people to have a wooden house at a winter site, with maybe just one summer hut (or more than one) at another location. Thus, the house as a main 'gathering' point has been around for a long time.

such errands, in order to avoid embarrassment should their request be refused.

Living in the district centre, one's movements are under constant surveillance and judgement from others. Wealth and status is visible in the clothes one wears, the house that one has built, and the trade networks that one has established. When leaving their houses to visit the post office, school, or when simply visiting a friend, people spend much time and effort dressing and making sure they are presentable. The district centre is very much a place for acting out different relations and displaying these publicly. For example, when the school holds competitions and events for children, or the district administration arranges a summer festival (*naadam*) with horse races and wrestling competitions, or the cultural club holds meetings and dances, people take the opportunity to show themselves as they wish to be seen by others. Bat-Ochir, for example, took great pride in the fact that his children and wife always wore the best clothes at these occasions, and he often drove short distances, just so that people could see his red jeep.

While this complex of different relations serves to connect people on different levels, it can also engulf and enclose people too. It is important to stress that the district centre is not a 'centre' for everyone. Some people avoid the district centre, especially once their children have left school. They prefer, instead, to source products, such as sugar and flour, from contacts in neighbouring districts or towns. People in the countryside frequently told me that they had no desire to visit the district centre. Life there, women claimed, was filled with nothing to do but tend to the needs of visitors, sit around and gossip, and feel the pressure of having to wear 'nice' clothes every time one went outside. It was common for men from the countryside to comment that if they lived in the district centre they would do nothing but drink and sleep. This ambivalence towards the district centre is probably best illustrated through a focus on young men from the countryside who sometimes visit the district centre to sell illegal animal parts to middlemen from the city (see Chapter 7).

Traders from the city frequent Ashinga in the autumn and spring in order to purchase hunted animal parts, antlers, pine nuts, and berries from local families. This valuable source of income means that, although many of the young men in this area left school in the early 1990s without any qualifications, through hunting and selling nuts and berries they are able to sport new trainers, build beautiful wooden houses at marriage, purchase red motorbikes, and ensure that vodka and cigarettes are never in short supply. The area as a whole is seen as fortunate in being able to subsidize economies based on livestock herding with alternative forms of income (be they legal

or not). After selling their produce, countryside men often stay in the district for a week or so to meet with friends and relatives who they may not have seen for some time. Unlike many women, who have continued to have a role in the district centre as kindergarten assistants, school teachers, accountants, and shop-keepers, many young men were, in the early 1990s, 'expelled' from the district centre. For example, Dorj, Renchin's middle son's schooling was cut short when he was called on to help his family with its newly acquired herds in the countryside. In addition to helping with the herding, he went on at least two long hunting trips each year. On return from such trips, he would often stop off very briefly at his parents' home and then ride straight into the district centre to sell his produce. Invariably, he would spend part of the money generated on alcohol. For him, the district centre was a place where he could re-establish relations with other men, meet with women, and reassert his presence as a part of the community.

Sights of men slumped against a fence drunk or the sound of bottles smashing against the ground were frequent, and night-time sounds of shouting and domestic violence were common. One time, while I was sleeping at Renchin's eldest son's house, Dorj returned in the middle of the night with another man and they began to fight in our enclosure. A stone was thrown through the window, showering us with glass. As the two men entered the house we watched as they thrashed about in the dark room. When Dorj bit the other man's hand so that his thumb was left hanging on only by a tendon, his older brother grabbed him, pulled him out of the house, and threw him on to his horse. Dorj slumped forward on his saddle. As his horse began to gallop off towards the countryside, he screamed out that he was not welcomed by his family, 'but soon things would change'. Soon they would see how he would never need them again! The following day, everyone in the district had heard what had happened. News, it seemed, travelled fast.

The fact that news did travel fast in the district centre was one of the reasons Bat-Ochir had been so adamant that I should not move to someone else's house. At certain communal occasions, such as during New Year celebrations or when we went to a meeting at the cultural club, it had been important that I be seen with his family. But they had done little to introduce me to neighbouring people. In part, this was due to the fact that they had only recently returned to live in the district so their daughter could stay with them while attending school, but they also deliberately kept themselves from others. Sometimes, I was left alone with their daughter while they went to the countryside to tend to their herds. People would visit the house, pretending to be on some errand, and then just sit and look at me. Nights on

our own were difficult. In the early part of my fieldwork I often lay awake listening out for the slightest sound, fearful that our house would become a target for arson. One night, I was woken by a thud somewhere near the stove and called out to the young girl. As we listened to the sound, I imagined someone on the roof pouring petrol down the chimney on the burning embers. Lighting the candle by the bed, we were relieved to see that the sound came from a cat that must have crept indoors when one of us had gone to the outhouse. Moments like this intensified the brooding sense of fear that seemed to underlie life in the district centre.

Slowly, I established contact with various people through my work at the kindergarten, playing card games with elderly people, or talking to the younger ladies who ran the kiosks, and making friends with women my own age. The man at the post office began to joke with me in public and others would invite me round for tea. People began to ask me questions about myself, and in so doing friendships were formed. One woman in particular, a neighbour, used to talk to me as I did my washing in the yard, or walk with me when I collected water for the house from the river. Instead of asking about me, she asked me what life was like living with Bat-Ochir. What, she wondered, did the family talk about, who came to visit them, and what did they do? Bat-Ochir, she explained, was known as a man with a quick temper. Although he didn't drink, he could easily be angered and liked to be in command. In the 1980s the family had lived in the district centre and his wife had been a sociable junior school teacher. Since Bat-Ochir had lost his job as a tractor driver for the co-operative, however, they had moved to the countryside where they focused on increasing his herds and running a business, selling wooden houses to people in the city. No one, it seemed, knew them well. They, as much as myself, were a point of curiosity. To build friendships beyond their house, I realized that I had to detach myself from them. What Bat-Ochir feared through my detachment was not so much the loss of me as a person, but the visible act of my rejection of them as people who contained everything I would need.

A place with fire

In Ulaanbaatar, people would tell me that they had heard 'bad things' (*muu yüm*) were happening in Ashinga. Apart from wooden houses, nuts and berries, large rivers, and drunken Buriads, Ashinga is renowned for having at least one active arsonist (*galdan shataagch*), something highly unusual and unknown anywhere else in Mongolia. News of the fires in Ashinga had even

been broadcast on national television. For three years before I arrived in 1999 arson attacks had been a frequent occurrence. As well as many private homes, the post office, cultural club, library, part of the clinic, some shops, and even the governor's house had all been burnt to the ground. Fires were usually started on the north side of the building. Buriad houses do not have windows or doors on this side, and anyone starting a fire here would go unnoticed. The wind from Siberia also tends to come from the north, easily igniting any small flame. In instances when a fire had been put out before it caused too much damage, pieces of black tar paper from the roof could sometimes be found crammed between the wooden logs of the building, presumably used to start the fire. No one had been physically hurt by the fires but many houses and their interiors had been destroyed. More telling perhaps was the sense of unease that flickered in people's eyes as they interacted in public. At a local community meeting, one man spoke out in a surprisingly frank manner: 'The problem is that even if we had the money to start an industry here, it wouldn't work because no one trusts each other.' His comment was received with a chilling silence. The sense of community the Buraid had maintained in the face of persecution by the Mongolian state was now being revealed as only skin deep—there was also a form of cruel separation and violence that they were inflicting on each other. The enemy, in this case, was not the Soviet state, nor other Mongols. Rather, the enemy, it seemed, was within.

At times tensions would heighten to the point that people were gripped by a sense of intense fear, with sleepless nights and a sense of personal pain. At other times, tensions would subside and nothing would be said about the fires for some time until another house was burnt down. In general, people would resist speculating on who or what caused the fires for fear that this would simply provoke further mistrust. While with the diviner, for example, I would sometimes hear people confess that they were worried that an argument or quarrel they had had with a neighbour might provoke retaliation in the form of an arson attack. The diviner would ensure that they carried out some practice to reduce the likelihood of such an action, rather than explicitly state that retaliation in the form of arson was probable. Similarly, Nergüi, a local shaman, was careful not to inflame suspicion beyond that of general uncertainty. During a ceremony held to find out whether a particular man had been cursed because he had dreamt of his teeth falling out, the shaman was careful to emphasize that this potential affliction was not the result of any curse from an individual in the community. Rather, accusations about curses were diverted by the shaman calling on the man's ancestral spirit (*ongon*), who was found to be angry and tearful

because he felt neglected by his family.[4] Suspending direct accusation meant that everyone was, in a sense, under suspicion, and everyone was worried that they might have the potential to trigger such an attack. In this sense, arson served to enforce very particular kinds of social behaviour and interactions.

Insurance against attack

What kinds of responses can be said to emerge when living with this ever-present threat? I think it is important to note this in some detail. Living in fear is often not an outcome of being privy to and seeing explicit violence. Fear is often generated by not seeing, by things felt to be present in their absence. How then do people in the district centre live with this omnipresent threat of violence? First, people tended to be reserved in their encounters with each other in the district centre. It was rare to see people publicly arguing, blaming, or accusing each other, despite the sounds of domestic disputes and night-time brawls. Many retreated into family networks and close friends, and it seemed as though even talking about the fires might draw the arsonists nearer and invite them to strike again. Indeed, whenever someone saw me take a photograph of a burnt site, they would ask me why I wanted to record something so horrible. Arson was something they wanted to conceal or block out, it seemed, even from themselves. Secondly, it was generally felt that if one helped to put out a fire, one might be suspected of having been the one to start it. Handmaa held me back one night when I had made for the door to help at a fire and warned me that if one enquired too much or went to look at the scene of arson one might be accused of being the perpetrator. Only those whose own houses were in immediate danger or their close family should help to put out the flames and try to rescue the contents of the house; they were the ones who had a direct stake in saving it. The day after a fire, it was common for people to clear the site of any debris and burnt timber. Once a house had burnt down on a site, a new house would never be built there again—the place was somehow tarnished.[5] The family seemed to need to take control over the humiliation

[4] Explanations such as this, whereby misfortune is attributed to an 'external' cause, are a standard kind of explanation of misfortune in Buriad communities, where curses and gossip-spells (*hel am*, *haraal*) are not so commonly invoked (pers. comm. Caroline Humphrey).

[5] Some sites were rebuilt on, especially those belonging to government buildings, such as the cultural club or the post office.

of having been targeted and move on as best they could. Clearing the site was one way of concealing the destruction.

Primarily, however, people responded to the threat of arson by becoming protective over their own property. After an attack, people would stay on night watches, taking it in turns to walk around the enclosures surrounding their houses. Water containers would be filled; yards would be swept of any flammable grass; and ferocious dogs were brought in from the countryside to guard people's homes. Other forms of protection were not always so visible. When I talked with my friend Enhtuyaa, she explained that people practised a variety of different kinds of insurance against potential attack. For instance, one evening while her family were in the countryside, their house in the district centre had suddenly caught fire and it was obvious that someone had deliberately tried to set it alight. Luckily, a relative had spotted the fire, and with the help of others, had managed to extinguish it before any damage was done. Fearing another attack on their house, Enhtuyaa's family consulted a shaman about how they might protect their building. He advised that they create a magical fence around the house that would protect the family against future attack. They made four copper crosses in the shape of swastikas (*has temdeg*). He then whispered 'magical words' (*shivshleg üg*) on to these objects and buried them in the ground at the four corners of their house. In turn, a middle-aged woman in the district centre inherited a shaman's mirror from her mother. She wrapped it in red cloth and placed it above the doorway of her house, an interstitial position where things pass in and out, to deflect any bad things from entering her home. With some houses having new extensions or other additions, other people took care not to make their houses stand out too much. In Chapter 4, for example, we saw how a young couple in the district centre, who had recently built a new house, were worried that their building might invite jealousy and retaliation in the form of arson. In fact, theirs was the building that I mentioned in the opening of this chapter, which, six years later, burnt to the ground.

I have already mentioned that when a new house is built, people hold a small ceremony to bless the building and ensure that those who live within it will be fortunate.[6] The agentive nature of houses (by which they protect and index those who live within their interior) is further marked through another common form of insurance which involves a ritual to 'cleanse/purify

[6] This kind of act is also performed by people who inhabit a house which has been lived in before. It is not uncommon for people to lend their houses to relatives if they are away for the winter or summer, and old, disused buildings, such as the reception area of the old sawmill or the entrance façade of the disused kindergarten, are sometimes converted into homes.

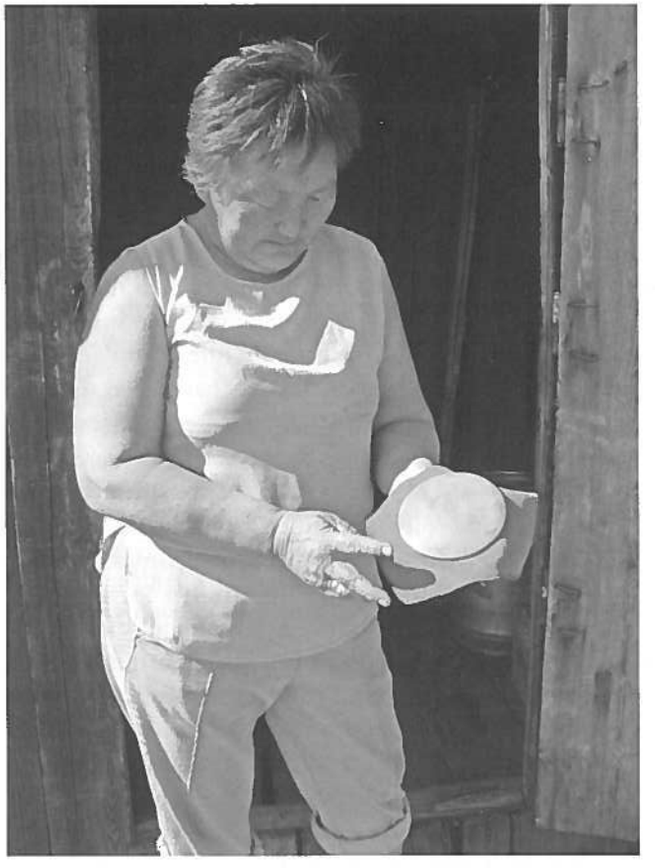

Figure 8.2 Woman with shamanic mirror-shield placed above her doorway.

the hearth' (*gal zasal*) and the 'spirit of the fire' (*hii gal*). In Chapter 6, I explained how every being (*am'tai yum*) is said to have an animating principle—luck-fortune (*süld hiimori*)—which rises up and down inside the body influencing one's work, health, temperament, and life. The hearth (*gal golomt*), which is inherited by the youngest son from his father, is linked to the presence of this animating principle on behalf of the household. Like an individual's luck-fortune, household luck (*geriin hiimori*) can also rise and, then, suddenly fall. Decline of household luck is commonly due to pollution of the hearth-fire (*gal buzartah*). This may be caused by human actions such as placing unclean objects in its flames, or it may be due to interpersonal relations such as arguments or disputes. In this sense, the hearth-fire is an

extension of the people who depend upon it. If it becomes polluted, they will suffer. If it is clean and pure, they will prosper.

In Ashinga, a common reason for performing a ceremony to cleanse the hearth was the fear that informal gossip (*tsagaan / har hel am*, lit. black and white tongue mouth) had tarnished the home in some way, which might invite retaliation in the form of arson. Here we see that houses can be open to attack if the people who live inside them cause various infractions. In this sense, the spark of fire could be present in a house before it was set alight. I return to this idea later in the chapter, but it is worth noting that the consequence of 'black gossip' (*har hel am*), such as people speaking badly of or arguing with someone, is similar to that of 'white gossip' (*tsagaan hel am*), or excessive praise. If people feel that bad words have been spoken, or objects in the home are polluted, people may scatter sacred sands as a way of cleansing the house and protecting it against further misfortune (Chapter 4). Daily offerings to local land masters, such as milk libations, derived from a family's sacred portion of fortune (*deej*), obtained from livestock, ensure that the hearth is pure and clean. Morning milk libations, communal summer offerings at the *ovoo* ceremony, and winter offerings at local family places are, however, not always enough to ensure one's household fortune (Chapter 2) and a specific ceremony is needed to ensure the hearth is clean, the fortune of the household is contained, and the health, work, and wealth of that family are good.[7]

In the course of my fieldwork I witnessed various ceremonies to purify the hearth (*galyn zasal*). One such ceremony, 'beckoning for the household' (*geriin dallaga*), is performed every three years or so with the help of the local diviner (Chabros 1992: 106).[8] Talking with a young couple in the district centre, they explained to me that they had decided to perform the ritual so that they and their house would be safe. There had been a lot of problems recently. The woman explained that her husband had been drinking and getting into fights, neighbours kept coming around demanding flour and sugar, and they were planning to leave the house for some time while they went to join her husband's parents at their summer pasture.

[7] See Humphrey *et al.* (1993: 53) for information about how the hearth can become polluted in Mongolia and Tuva.

[8] A second ceremony, 'fire offering' (*gal tahih*), involves sacrificing a whole sheep with rancid butter to the fire. This ceremony is seen as necessary only if the family has experienced acute misfortune or loss. A third ceremony, 'cleansing and beckoning the fire' (*gal dallaga avhuulsan zasal*), is performed annually on the day before New Year and involves placing a small piece of the New Year fatty meat into the fire before the family sits down for the last meal of the year.

Oyunaa, the diviner, had suggested they perform a ceremony to cleanse the 'polluted hearth' (*buzartsan gal, emzegtei*). The woman described the ceremony as follows:

> The day before the hearth purification ceremony (*galyn zasal*) I cleaned the house and gathered together a large plate of white foods (*tsagaan idee*), biscuits, rice, sweets, dried curds, and so on, just like I would do for New Year. The following day Oyunaa burnt a bundle of thread outside each of the four corners of our house. A bundle of black thread was burnt at each of the two rear corners [to the north]. At each of the two front south-facing corners of our house she burnt red bundles of thread. This cleared any curse-like gossip (*tsagaan / har hel am*) so that it would not linger with us and affect us.[9] The three of us [the woman, her husband, and their young daughter] circled the outside of the house clockwise three times holding the plate of food. We offered part of the food to the hearth fire and ate the rest of it ourselves. The diviner then passed incense around the outside and inside of our house, using the embers from our fire to light it. We then passed it around ourselves. I made milk libations outside to our sacred cairn and she read part of 'Altan Gerel' (a Buddhist book). For three days after this ceremony we could not leave our house or give anything away to outsiders. If people gave us things during these three days it was good but we were not allowed to give anything away.

The prohibition (*tseer*) on people or things leaving the house is seen to preserve (*darah*) the purity of the hearth-fire and household for a maximum of three years. The renewed state of the hearth 'solidifies' over these three days to create a permanent template by which household members can live. That gifts can be received *from* outsiders during this period further indicates an emphasis on beckoning or harnessing fortune, rather than letting it slip away.

Fire as purification

Historical and ethnographic accounts about Mongolia frequently stress that the hearth-fire is something to be worshipped as a source of continuity over generations. The hearth, along with the house, is traditionally passed to the youngest son, the 'hearth son' (*golomt hüü*), along with the largest portion of his parents' livestock. Passing on the hearth in this way is held to contain the accumulated fortune of the patriline. Since the physical location of the place

[9] *Tsagaan har hel am* (i.e. curses). Human curses are caused by praising a household or individual too much (*tsagaan hel am*), or people speaking badly or arguing with you (*har hel am*).

in which one lives moves, it is the hearth and the interior of the house that remains a source of continuity rather than the location of the house or the house itself. Male heads of households appeared to honour their hearths through various small ritual acts. Renchin often spoke of the fire as a woman; when throwing bits of yellow butter on to the fire he would say: 'The hearth god is female (*galyn burhan emegtei*) because it keeps us warm and feeds us.'[10] On New Year's Eve (*bitüüün*) Bat-Ochir offered the first slice of mutton tail fat to the fire. Making offerings to the fire ensures the wellbeing of those who use it. In turn, the hearth is sometimes viewed as a kind of oracle that conveys messages and signs. Delgermaa, for example, would often stop a task to listen to the sound of the fire in order to tell if some visitor was arriving, or if her children were near. Traditionally, incoming women make offerings to their in-laws' hearth at marriage as part of a process of incorporating themselves among their affinal kin. Humphrey (1987) notes that the daughter-in-law, as a new bride, bows to her in-laws' fire three times (Humphrey 1987: 45). At some weddings, the married couple may also light the first fire of their new home together and make the first tea (pers. comm., Lars Højer). Fire is a source of 'fertility, success and longevity of the family' (Humphrey 1987: 44). To honour the hearth-fire through offerings and to bring firewood into the house is to show that one is someone who contributes to the source that protects and nourishes. Focusing on the hearth, we may say that it is not so much the outer structure of the building, and its elaborate additions, but what is concealed inside its interior that is viewed as a resource that generates wealth and protection.

Fire is also used as a means of purification. In the past, women passed through fire at marriage because they could be polluting to the 'bone' of their in-laws (Bulag 1998: 263). Even today people purify themselves by means of passing incense smoke over their hands and clothes after they have returned from a journey (Chapter 4; Bulag 1998: 263). Embers from the fire, along with juniper incense, are often used in small ritual acts of cleansing and purification, and as a means to separate things from a person who may be causing them harm (Chapters 4 and 7). Infants' foreheads are marked with hearth soot as a form of protection when they leave the house (Chapter 4). If an object has been used or lent to others, the best way to cleanse it is to pass it over the fire. Taking these varied practices involving hearth soot, smoke, and fire into account, we see that fire is a source of purification and protection and is used to manage or absorb potentially threatening external

[10] In this sense, we see that maleness (such as the hearth which is passed between men) can include femaleness.

Figure 8.3 Purification using burning embers and smoke from the hearth.

influences (Bulag 1998: 263).[11] Given that the hearth is conceived of as a source of protection, one can see why, during situations of fear and suspicion, one might want to perform a purification ceremony to cleanse the fire.

From this perspective, arson could be seen as an attempt to purify the hearth-fire in a sweeping and dramatic act. It is conceivable that the hearths of the houses that are burnt in acts of arson may somehow be perceived as 'polluted' (be that morally or spiritually). The use of fire could be seen to cleanse them through their destruction. Thus, the point that fire protects does not just encompass the concept of a single household with its hearth, but could apply to the idea that arson is a means by which to purify or cleanse the district centre as a whole. Attending to the element of fire, it 'appear[s] to be charged with numerous contradictions' (Bachelard 1968: 102). On the one hand, fire is a source of destruction: something that separates people from their homes. On the other hand, it is a conductive source of prosperity and fortune: it can purify and protect people and is a source of continuity that unites. Fire (arson), it seems, destroys another kind of fire (the hearth). While arson may be a means by which others 'purify' your hearth, it is also an act that cleanses the district of particular households and their potentially 'polluting' agendas. Fire, then, appears as a resource used to make moral statements about social relations in the district centre as a whole.

In Chapter 3, I noted that in the 1930s people's genealogies were burnt when men came in the middle of the night and raided household chests and

[11] The notion of fire as a source of protection and power has varied historically. During the Mongol Empire, foreigners passed through two fires when they entered Mongolian territory. Although there was no hearth at the Qing Emperor's court, according to a myth at Mergen Monastery in Inner Mongolia, the Emperor invited the Mergen Gegen (the highest reincarnation from the monastery) to conduct a fire ritual for him (and possibly for the empire) (pers. comm. Caroline Humphrey). Kaplonski (2008) has noted that in the early to mid-1930s, arson was sometimes used as a form of political sabotage linked to counter-revolutionary movements in central Mongolia. In Altanbulag, a town on the Russian border that acted as a base for the provisional socialist government, acts of sabotage were carried out against the revolutionaries. 'These acts included arson against the telegraph office, the fire brigade, a warehouse, and fodder stores for the military's horses, among others' (Kaplonski 2008: 329). Kaplonski (2008) notes that the central theatre in Ulaanbaatar, the site of early show trials in the 1930s, was also destroyed in a fire in the 1940s. He states: 'Some have suggested that this was an act of arson, carried out because the show trials of the lamas had been held there. It was even rumoured that, as the theatre was burning, people exclaimed, "What a beautiful fire!"' (Kaplonski 2008: 335). The word for 'beautiful' in Mongolian is based on the same root as the word for *good* and in this case points to the idea that the fire was (morally) correct as well as beautiful (cf. Chabros 1987: 268). Arson is a common form of political protest. See also Hubert and Mauss ([1964] 1981: 26): 'The fire is the slayer of demons.'

confiscated people's herds. Dislocating people from a sense of history through fire, it seems, is not confined to the turmoil of the 1930s. Arson attacks on people's houses similarly separate and rupture people's connections with the past. Primarily, arson separates people from the physical structure of the house. Houses along with their hearths are often inherited by the youngest son of a family and are passed on over generations. Indeed, houses in the district centre often evoke inter-generational memories. For example, when I was staying with Narangerel, a local female shaman in the district centre, Tsendmaa told me that the house was exactly as she remembered it as a young girl when she had visited it many times while playing truant from school. Like other forms of state violence, the burning down of someone's house is a very public sign of being targeted. It is a sign that someone has singled you out as vulnerable and they have the power to destroy you. Arson can be said to destroy your image in an act of public humiliation. It also makes visible aspects of people's relations that they would rather have concealed. It is the means by which people 'see' or deliberately reveal the friction of personal relationships. In this sense, we may speak of the fact that an invisible spark or flame of sorts exists in a house well before any act of arson makes this spark visible. This tension between fire as a source of continuity and as a source of rupture or separation is something to which I return at the end of this chapter.

Anxious relations in the present

Speculation as to the perpetrator of the fires varied according to who was targeted and when. Could it be that the few Halh families who remained in the eastern part of the district, and used to work at the now almost redundant sawmill, were targeting each other? Or were the fires a consequence of longstanding feuds between the Buriad and the Halh? Was this simply an extension of the factions that had prevailed during the socialist period when, as a middle-aged Buriad man explained, as school boys they would take sides and fight in the dormitories, and as young men, would always feel different? The causes remained uncertain. Factions also resulted from divides that were neither inter-ethnic nor intra-ethnic. Some attacks seemed to be related to local government politics. In one year, the governor's house was set alight, as were various state-run facilities, such as the post office, the library, the cultural centre, and the school dormitory. Here, fire appeared as a form of protest against policy that was being marked out as wrong and in need of change; it also seemed to be tied up with wider political anxieties about who

was wielding power and who had the right to do so, particularly in the lead-up to various elections. At other times, people speculated that the fires were carried out by a single man, located some distance from the district, who simply wanted everyone to leave in order that he could have the place to himself. Rumours circulated that a figure in a large coat had been seen on hilltops near the district watching the flames rising from afar. Could it be that it was someone who simply loved fire? But, then, in one night, three houses burnt down in different parts of the district centre almost simultaneously and it appeared that it was several people with different agendas and motives, rather than one man working on his own. In more recent times, the fires seem to have targeted the young entrepreneurs who are navigating new forms of wealth in the open market economy.

I present an instance of how speculation turned and shifted uneasily from one explanation to another. In the summer of 2001, people were initially calmed by the fact that the police had arrested a man on suspicion of causing many of the fires. The man was held to be one of Ashinga's richest herders, with more than a thousand head of cattle, and it was speculated that he had hired four children aged from ten years upwards to burn down houses for a small payment. His ability to wield power over others was viewed as threatening—he had allegedly attempted to coerce people to vote for him in the local elections. While many people hoped that the police had arrested the right man (the news had even reached national television), ideas as to his motives varied. For example, a middle-aged man in the district centre explained:

> This man was seized by the Province police a few years ago because they suspected he was responsible. But they released him because they didn't have enough evidence and the fires carried on. It is strange though, we had a lot of different governors and he just carried on. Maybe it was not linked to local politics. When the fires started he had just run for a local government position and had lost, so people thought he was doing it to get rid of the governor at the time. But there were many different governors and it kept happening. Maybe the person who did it just wanted us all to leave. Maybe he wanted the whole place to himself. That is what I think anyway.

Another woman, who knew the man and came from the same area of the countryside, explained:

> Yes, it was a person from our place (*nutgiin hün*) and he was very rich and no one wants to believe that it was him but it was. We know that now. He was like a sadist. He enjoyed seeing things burn. Maybe he would sit on the hills surrounding the district at night and watch the fires while people's houses burnt down. He was crazy and that is the only motive that we can understand.

Speculation as to motives changed again, however, when people began to suspect that this man may not have instigated the fires, but was arrested as a result of his involvement in wider political feuds. The charge of arson, it appeared, was simply an excuse to interrogate him about other issues. In less than a year, he was released from prison and returned to his life as a herder. From this short account, we see how explanations shifted and changed in relation to just one man. This jumping from one kind of explanation to another was characteristic of the way people came to talk about the fires. Nothing was proved or confirmed. No one was charged. The fires, along with the sense of personal humiliation and fear, continued. While arson as an event was a very visible means of singling someone out, the causes behind it were always multiple and seemed to disappear in the flames.

Questions of inheritance and ownership

So far I have stressed that houses in the district centre may be viewed as the outward manifestation of a person's wealth and a source of prestige. Owning a house in the district centre is also valued because it is a means by which one can position oneself in the district and extend one's sphere of influence. District centre houses are gathering points where plans may be discussed and deals struck. The value of houses is, thus, also due to the possibilities that they may open up for those who inhabit them. If houses are of such value, who can claim ownership over them and how are they inherited? In pre-revolutionary Mongolia (until 1912), wealth in movable property, such as animal herds, and other assets was passed between men (Maiskii [1960] 1982: 12).[12] Sons were allotted a share of their father's

[12] In pre-revolutionary Mongolia, the law was governed by two Manchu regulatory codes: the code of 1789 and the code of 1815 (Riasanovsky 1965: 139; Maiskii [1960] 1982: 5). These codes were mostly used as manuals for court proceedings, and issues such as family inheritance fell to customary law. Yet, the code of 1789 posited that a man's heirs were his sons and descendants in the direct male line (Riasanovsky 1965: 127). In the code of 1815, a man's heirs were his sons and direct descendants, then the brothers, and last of all the clan (Riasanovsky 1965: 134). Prior to this, and among noble elites, tanistry was often practised. Because all male members of a noble lineage were considered to have equal claim to succession, the successor was the individual who was able to eliminate his competitors through personal bonds of loyalty and subjugation (Fletcher 1986). In Autonomous Mongolia, in 1919, there was an attempt to create a digest of laws, based on an amalgam of Manchu–Chinese–Mongolian law, but customary law still prevailed outside court proceedings.

wealth, which was divided during his lifetime, and the youngest son (*otgon / golomt hüü*) inherited his household (Riasanovsky 1929: 201–2; 1965: 170, 251–2). Like their Halh Mongol counterparts, among the Hori Buriad customary inheritance law concerned divisible wealth in livestock.[13]

Written genealogies played a role in establishing inheritance rights. Humphrey (1979) has noted that genealogies are created for various purposes and these determine the kinds of people who are recorded in them, leading to different kinds of genealogies. During the seventeenth to twentieth centuries 'political offices, ranks, and titles, together with herds and other wealth continued to be inherited [by the Hori Buriad in Buryatia] by reference to genealogies' (Humphrey 1979: 252). At the same time, tsarist support for the heredity principle no doubt enhanced the importance of genealogies, for ease of taxation (Humphrey 1979: 253). Among the Hori Buriad, who needed to move freely within large tracts of land owing to extensive nomadic pastoralism, 'there was no need therefore for genealogies to determine rights to land' (Humphrey 1979: 259). Instead, genealogies were mainly used to establish exogamy, this being particularly important for the Buriad families who arrived in Mongolia, when confronted with other migrants whom they might not have known so well.

In the early socialist period, written genealogies were destroyed in an attempt to recast kin relations and entitlements (both of rank and of property). Later, with the collective ownership of assets in socialist co-operatives, wealth was generally held by the collective, rather than by extended kin groups or individuals. During this period, any private property took the form of personal property that was attributed to an individual through long use (Humphrey 2002a: 67). Heirs, including the spouse and children of the deceased, were able to inherit equal shares of the deceased's personal property, but citizens were encouraged to leave their property by will, including dwelling structures, ordinary household articles, and furnishings, as well as deposits in the MPR (Mongolian People's Republic) state bank (Butler 1982: 356–7). Despite this emphasis on wills, Humphrey (2002a) has pointed out that 'in the 1980s Mongolian

[13] The first known legal code compiled by the Hori Buriad living outside the Manchu Empire dates to 1781 (Riasanovsky 1929: 180–6; 1965: 69). This code is mainly concerned with the collection of taxes and trade regulations, and most law remained customary in character. Interestingly, Riasanovsky (1965: 75) notes that 'the customary law of the Buriats comprised many provisions of private law' in relation to the compensation for damages and losses. Immovable property inheritance was also developed by the Buriad with regard to agriculture and the cultivation of haymows (Riasanovsky 1965: 259).

people did not generally consider it proper to make wills (*gerees*)' (Humphrey 2002a: 71). Indeed, it was common for people to transfer what form of private property they did have through customary inheritance law.

The same may be said today. It is common for a man to divide his livestock as soon as his sons are able to take responsibility for them, and some of the animals (mostly cattle) are given as dowry to daughters. Custodial ownership over winter pastures and their cabins are often inherited by the youngest son. As mentioned in Chapter 3, since the 1990s, people register as the custodians of their winter pasture with the local administration, and can be said to have 'ownership' over access to this land. They can pass this ownership on to their children at any point, and transfer the registered name.[14] Regardless of these conventions, and while wills do exist, people in Ashinga do not make them. It is becoming increasingly obvious, however, that customary inheritance law cannot encompass the range of assets and forms of property being accumulated in the neo-liberal economy (particularly immovable property). As people gain new forms of wealth, disputes emerge between potential heirs as to how assets should be distributed. Further, while a man is expected to distribute his property among his kin when alive (Humphrey 2002a: 67), inevitably some things fall between the cracks and are not distributed, or a man may die suddenly, without having distributed his assets. With regard to houses in the district centre, a young man will often build a house there at marriage (or inherit his parents' house) and this will be registered in his name. If the man dies, according to customary law the deceased man's youngest son is considered the rightful inheritor of his property.

I observed two cases where disputes over the ownership of property occurred when the male head of a household died suddenly. When a good friend of mine died in 2008, his wife continued to live in their rather beautiful house in the district centre with their youngest son. The deceased man's youngest brother volunteered to stay with her for the first year, to keep her company in her year of mourning. When he brought his own wife to live with them, however, it became obvious that he intended to claim the

[14] To transfer the name of a winter pasture to a non-kin member is to relinquish rights to this place for one's descendants. I know of one case where the family were in a dire economic situation due to their inability to pay back loans to the local bank (see Chapter 9) and 'sold' their winter pasture to another herder, changing the names with the local administration. The exchange of money is done between the herders themselves and not through the local government administration, as custodianship does not equal ownership and is, therefore, not indexed to a quantifiable price.

house as his own.[15] In the absence of any written will, this caused a dispute between the widow's family and the deceased husband's family. According to customary law, the deceased man's youngest son should have inherited the house. But since he was too young to claim it, his paternal uncle (and by extension the deceased man's side of the family) attempted to seize it as his own. A similar case concerns the death of another man in the district. When this man died, his widow continued to live in their district centre house, with their children, but they also lived for part of the year in the countryside tending their animals. Not long after the man's death, his younger brother attempted to claim the house as his own. The widow resisted giving the house to her in-laws. She ensured that someone stayed in the house at all times and this person even helped to put out an attempted arson attack on the house. In these cases we see that a woman does not automatically inherit her husband's property and disputes may occur when ownership of marital houses is claimed by the deceased man's family. As suggested, houses are made by men and are an important index of their status and power. Like the various pieces that I have been describing, such as tufts of tail hair, individual photographs, and parts of umbilical cords, they are both tied to their original producers and part of a wider collective ownership that gathers fortune to the household. Houses stand at that uneasy juncture between private property (belonging to a wider collective family) and personal property (belonging to an individual person). The two cases I have described seem to highlight a struggle between the in-laws' view of the house as private property (that is, as owned by the wider family collectively) and the widow's view of the house as personal property (that is, linked explicitly to her deceased husband and to their marriage).[16]

[15] Living with your brother's widow and claiming his property after his death recalls the practice of levirate marriage. Levirate marriage determines that a man's widow and property remain with his kin and his brother may marry her. Scholars have remarked on the custom of levirate marriage in Mongolia prior to the socialist period (see Birge 1995; Riasanovsky 1965: 234). In Mongolia '[t]he levirate operated most often in the case of a younger brother inheriting his older brother's widow, but it could also operate across generations: a son could inherit his father's secondary wives, a nephew his uncle's widow, etc.' (Birge 1995: 115). This system played an important role with regard to the containment of labour and property. It prevented the break-up of property after a man's death and retained a woman's dowry and labour in her husband's family (see Riasanovsky 1965: 234–5). Riasanovsky (1965) notes that among the Buriad this customary law was modified earlier than among Halh Mongols, allowing the widow to remarry outside her husband's family.

[16] My distinction between 'private' and 'personal' property follows Humphrey's (2002a) analysis of the Mongolian concept of private property as something tied to an individual through long use and personal attachment. With increasing ownership of different forms of non-

Could disputes over the inheritance of property trigger retaliation in the form of arson? At first, this might seem counter-intuitive. If one wants to claim ownership over a building, why destroy it? When looking at the details presented to me by the district's governor, however, two kinds of arson became evident. Shops and government buildings had often been subject to complete destruction through arson. This kind of arson could be viewed as a form of political protest and an expression of wider frustrations concerning emerging inequalities in the district. In contrast, many attacks on family homes were 'attempted' arson attacks. That is, fires had been started on one side of the building, but had often been put out by neighbours, or those inside the house, before the fire caused too much damage. Here, setting fire to a house may be a means by which to scare the current inhabitants into leaving, rather than destroy the structure completely. In relation to this, we may recall that if you tend to a fire you are sometimes thought to be the one who started it. This makes sense if your aim is to scare the current inhabitants enough to leave, but not to burn the building down completely. Equally, if the building does burn down (which is also the case in many instances), then destroying a building where ownership is disputed may be one way of putting an end to that dispute. Arson, some speculated, could be a way of dealing with inheritance that did not go the way one party expected it to.

Anxious relations with the past

With no single explanation for the various attacks, it was sometimes thought that arson must be an outcome of the cumulative effects of past actions. Here, arson was assigned not to the agency of a living person exclusively but to the morality of past actions of the community at large. In moments of reflection, people speculated that the reason for the fires could be an outcome of people's actions during the early socialist period (see Introduction). A middle-aged woman explained to a group of us that, when she had asked a local elderly Buddhist man (who had been a monk prior to the socialist period) about the reason for the arson attacks, he had explained to her that many years ago Ashinga people did not listen to the warnings of two local monks, and many precious religious books from a nearby monastery were burnt on the banks of the Eg River. These monks came from a monastery

movable private property and other kinds of privately held effects, the rising interest in tracing genealogies, both written and shamanic, could be seen as a means by which people are able to establish entitlements to property and resources within families.

that was located to the north of the Onon River, roughly 26 kilometres from the present-day district centre. It was founded by a monk called Gelegjamts Doorombo. Gelegjamts worked at the Leningrad Buddhist Studies Centre, but in 1923 he was invited to work at the Academy of Sciences in Ulaanbaatar. In 1927 he retired, became a resident of Mongolia, and moved to the north-east Mongolian–Russian border where he set up the monastery with ten student monks and various younger disciples. The monks were each trained in particular branches of Buddhism, such as astrology and medicine. In 1938, Gelegjamts was arrested and killed along with the monks in a neighbouring district and the monastery was destroyed (Dashsharav 2001). One of the monks did survive, as Gelegjamts had prophesied, and local people hid his identity throughout the socialist period. Because people had not heeded the advice of these monks, the woman recalled, arson attacks and other bad things were destined to happen here. Asking the disciple-monk if the arson attacks would ever cease, the woman was told, 'No, they will not stop. People here will always see fire (*gal harah*).' Here, arson was explained as an outcome of past actions that had accumulated to make this into a 'hard/difficult place' (*hatuu gazar*). Oyunaa, the local diviner, also explained that if people do 'bad things' (*muu yüm*), 'then their life will decrease in quality and so will the place in which they live'. From this perspective, people's 'bad thoughts/minds' (*müü setgel*) and actions caused the landscape of Ashinga to become 'hard' (*hatuu*) and 'ferocious' (*dogshin*). For the situation to change, she insisted, people must 'care for and restore' (*zasal hiih*) the land masters of the mountains and rivers.

Tümendelger, the local shaman-poet, had another explanation. Arson, he suggested, could be due to hauntings, especially by those killed during the 'political persecutions' (*Uls töriin helmegdüüleltiin üed*). In his conversations and letters to me, Tümendelger explained that these people had not received proper funerals. They had died in fear and their bodies were left to rot in open mass graves. Because of this, he explained, these people's souls had not been reborn. Instead, they took the form of invisible 'raised corpses' (*üiheer*) that attached themselves to living people and caused them to become physically unwell and do bad things. Shamans, he explained, were the only ones who could reveal whether they had attached themselves to you, or were causing you harm, and if so, they could sever them from you through ritual beatings. Buyandelgeriyn (2007: 135–6) has written about the role of *üiheer* in shamanic practice in a neighbouring province called Dornod. She notes that, unlike ancestral or origin spirits (*ongon*), *üiheer* are mute and ambiguous spirit-like entities whose identities, names, and residence are undetermined. Like Tümendelger, she mentions that *üiheer* are viewed as the tormented souls

of those who were persecuted by the state, especially those who were killed during the time of the great purges and did not receive proper burials and propitiation. In their lifetimes, these ordinary people were cast as outsiders by the socialist state. In a similar way, the *üiheer* also exist inbetween, located in neither the human nor the spirit world (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 135), wandering endlessly without a voice or home. Victims of the purges thus appear to take the form of malevolent spirits, inflicting misfortune on their descendants. As the souls of those people who experienced violent deaths, the *üiheer* 'monumentalize the silenced memories of state violence' (Buyandelgeriyn 2007: 136). In tending to them through shamans, Buyandelgeriyn (2007) argues, people are forced to face suppressed memories of state violence. In this sense, changes in the way people relate to the deceased echo changes in the political life of the living (cf. Kwon 2008: 34).

From these accounts we see that deceased people are not a unitary category, but can take a variety of forms. In relation to the diverse ways of engaging with the deceased, Kwon (2007, 2008) makes an important distinction between gods, ancestors, and ghosts, who receive different kinds of attention in communities in central Vietnam. The ghosts of those who have suffered tragic deaths relate particularly to those who died as the casualties of war, and whose bodies are still missing. These ghosts are not recognized through ritual activities inside households or at ancestral shrines; instead they roam the streets and undefined places, migrating from place to place in a liminal existence (Kwon 2007). Like the *üiheer* described above, people are beginning to attend to these ghosts, identifying them as their ancestors, and attempting to tie them to particular places. They point to the people whose bodies are still missing from the chaos of the socialist persecutions and from war and whose identities are not fully integrated in household shrines, such as by way of ancestral portraits in the household. Kwon (2008: 29) notes 'The proliferation of ghost-related actions in contemporary Vietnamese cultural life should be therefore considered in relation to the proliferation of violent death in Vietnam's recent political history.' The idea that ghosts of deceased people may haunt or attach themselves to living descendants, causing them to do destructive things, has also been noted among other shamanic peoples in parts of Siberia.[17] Van Dusen (2001) has described how the Nanai,

[17] Among Buriad city dwellers in the Siberian town of Ulan Ude, misfortune may also be attributed to people who lived in the past. Humphrey (1999) notes: 'the shamanic construction of causality is that otherwise inexplicable happenings are brought about by the vengeance of neglected spirits, these being the souls of dead humans, transformed by ancestral injustices into the touchy "masters" of mountains, rocks, trees, or springs' (Humphrey 1999: 8).

who live along the Amur River in Siberia, claim that their communities are currently plagued by drunkenness because there are many souls 'hanging around the villages who have not been seen off to the next world' (Van Dusen 2001: 221). Such 'unescorted souls' cause problems for the living, particularly among the men who were the ones who suffered more severely during the Soviet period. More of them died in wars, it was explained, fighting or through suicide, and their souls have been left unaccompanied and roam the village (Van Dusen 2001: 221). The idea that the souls of people who suffered violent, often state-initiated, deaths and were not afforded proper funerals haunt the living, causing them to do bad things, resonates with accounts in Ashinga. Arson, it seems, was tied to lingering senses of humiliation and to discontent among men, which resonates with events in both the socialist and early post-socialist era.

The enemy within

Notwithstanding these various explanations, the randomness of the attacks led many people to think that, rather than being directed towards individual people, arson was simply a means to propagate fear in the district centre. In this sense, arson appears as an internal manifestation of a terror that has haunted these people's lives since the early 1930s. As we have seen, destruction was present, well before any buildings were burnt down, in the form of midnight raids, when people and their belongings were suddenly taken away and destroyed, seemingly at random. Acts of arson echo these previous acts of forced destruction, separating people from objects that the state viewed as morally unacceptable. In 1933, the first large-scale arrest of the Buriad in Hentii occurred as an outcome of a case generally referred to as '*Lhümbiin Hereg*'. This case allowed the early Mongolian socialist government to denounce many Buriad as counter-revolutionaries and Japanese spies. Tseren (2007), a Buriad historian in Mongolia who has researched this case, states:

> It is no coincidence that the two eastern provinces, whose people consist of Buriads, who came from Russia to Mongolia to live, were charged. It is no coincidence that the case started in Hentii Province where all the Buriad males were arrested and charged with being embroiled in political persecution. This was the beginning of the Russian Stalinist plan to eradicate the Buriad who were a minority Mongol group. (Tseren 2007: 67, my translation)

Drawing attention to the fact that the Buriad were targeted, not so much for what they had done but for who they were, Tseren (2007) points out that these arrests were a direct result of Stalin's resentment towards the Buriad for having left Russia in the early 1900s. Being careful not to denounce the country in which they currently live, people would often talk of these arrests as an outcome not of Mongolian, but of Russian resentment towards the Buriad. Deflecting the agent of violence to an outsider was one way in which they could carry on living in Mongolia and make this place their home.

Sometimes, however, the boundary between persecutor and persecuted was not so clear. Although I never heard it spoken of directly, the well-known dissident Mongolian poet Choinom has drawn attention to the confusion over who was whose enemy during this period.

> Although I did not witness the 1930s myself,
> I saw many [women] lamenting and crying over their lost relatives . . .
> In those difficult years of class struggle,
> When everybody disputed whether to plough the valley or not,
> Whether to set up communes or not,
> When, in the subtle boundary between wrongness and correctness,
> A Buriad would kill a Buriad.
>
> (from the poem 'Buriad' (1973) by Choinom, in Byambaa 1990, translation by myself and Baasanjav Terbish)

Clearly, this period was a time of great confusion. People switched allegiances, seemingly overnight, and one's friend or relative could suddenly become an informer. Tseren (2007) gives a further example of people whom one may presume as insiders suddenly turning into outsiders, when, in early 1933, a Buriad man in Hentii wrote a letter to the Ministry of Internal Affairs denouncing another Buriad man as a Japanese spy and asking for his immediate arrest. 'The next day, the letter arrived on the desk of . . . the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs . . . This was the spark that consequently lit the fire of political persecution (*helmegdüüleltiin galyn döliig asaaj*)' (Tseren 2007: 71, my translation). Tseren's statement appears prophetic. This spark, generated when Buriads began accusing each other, was not restricted to the socialist period alone. In a very literal sense, this fire is still present. In saying this I do not mean that the psychological trauma of the 1930s persists in the same way. Nor do I mean to compare the experience of state violence to current forms of internal feuding in the form of arson. Rather, what I want to highlight is that while the Buriad do talk of the 'Soviet regime as something that happened to them' (Humphrey [1998] 2001: viii), they also recognize that a Buriad intellectual elite played a crucial role in introducing Soviet ideology to Mongolia and they all helped to bring this ideology to reality, with many cherishing its promise very dearly. Behind this hope and

optimism—or perhaps moving beside it as its shadow—was the great ambiguity forced on ordinary people at this time, namely, that even if they did try to speak out against their suffering, they knew the state could equally claim that they had taken part in creating the context for its possibility.

This ambiguity of being both victims and willing participators in different forms of Soviet state power has, in a sense, sustained the Buriad's unwillingness to confront the fact that the enemy may also exist within. This is clear in cases where they set themselves against others in order to define themselves as different—for example, in the early socialist period the Buriad proudly asserted that they had better education and skills than ordinary Halh Mongols. And yet, this difference appears fractured and splintered when viewed from other perspectives. In relation to the arson attacks, for instance, no one denounces anyone openly, and yet it is clear that arson is not something that is forced on them from 'outside'. The boundary between who is an insider and who is an outsider becomes blurred. In this sense, arson appears to mimic older forms of state violence and terror that works on the premise that victims will remain silent because they are haunted by the idea that they have somehow brought the terror on themselves. Like the internal ambiguity of the 1930s and the Buriad's relation to the Mongolian state, we have seen that fire turns on a similar tension. It is both something that can protect while also being something that destroys. In the following section, I present the perspective of someone who was the repeated target of arson. Taking this perspective, we see how arson extends beyond the burning of buildings to produce longer-term rupture and change.

Fire as event

After the cultural centre had been burnt down four times and the director's house had been targeted, burning it to the ground and irreparably damaging his elderly mother's health, any hope that Bold, the long-standing director of the cultural centre (*soyolyn töv*), could rise above this persistent persecution evaporated and he decided to leave Ashinga altogether. When I met Bold in the summer of 2005, he was visiting the district for the first time in two years since he had moved to a mining town. Life in the mining town had been difficult. While his wife had managed to find a job and his son had married and graduated from college, he himself had spent most of his time sitting at home drinking and only intermittently working as a truck driver for the mine. His body looked swollen and languid, but his eyes retained a flicker of the jovial and upbeat energy that used to characterize

him. On one occasion, while collecting berries with a group of people by the River Balj, I found myself sitting with Bold on the riverbank in the afternoon sun. Containers of berries and a canister of homemade vodka were placed at our side. We took turns to swig at the canister while munching on the berries and he began to sing some of his mother's favourite songs. This moment was punctuated, however, when I noticed that tears were streaming down his face. With the other berry-pickers deep in the shrubbery collecting berries, he began to reflect on what had come to pass since we had last seen each other.

I had not wanted to enquire too much about his life at first. I knew from his close friend, Renchin's younger brother Dashdondog, that the arson attack on his house had deeply affected him. It had taken great courage for him to return to Ashinga knowing that the person, or people, so obviously against him probably resided there still. That afternoon on the riverbank, he explained that while on military service as a young man, the local government had called him back from the army to begin his work as director of the newly established cultural centre. He had worked as director for more than twenty years. He loved his work but it had also been hard. Four times the cultural centre had burnt to the ground and each time he had been able to find men to rebuild it only because of his steadfast friendships. When his house was set alight and his elderly mother only narrowly escaped the fire, he decided that he had to leave.

After some time, he began to reflect on and question what had come to pass. He consulted a famous shaman in a nearby district as to who could have been targeting him so relentlessly. The shaman told him that it was a person with a 'black or bad disposition' (*har setgel*) who owned many animals and lived to the west of his house. I asked if he had any idea who this might be and he said he did, but he could never accuse this person directly. There was no point in doing so, he explained, because he would never be arrested. I asked if he thought several people might be carrying out the attacks. He said that if this were the case, then we would all be accusing each other. This final statement is, I think, revealing of Bold as a person. While previous accounts may suggest that people suspected each other, Bold felt that his relations with others were stable and firm. Because of this, it came as a great shock to him that his own house (and thereby himself personally) could be the target of such violence.

Bold suggested that a 'wealthy person' (*bayan hün*) with a 'black or bad disposition' had targeted him. If Bold's answer was short, it was easy for someone familiar with his neighbourhood in the district to know to whom he was referring. Just to the west of where his house had once stood lived a

man who owned many herds. Because of his wealth he sometimes employed people to watch his livestock while he engaged in other entrepreneurial activities. By contrast, Bold was a widely adored figure who regularly organized events for those in the district, drank and shared whatever he had with other men. In return, each time the cultural centre burnt down there had been no shortage of people willing to assist in rebuilding it for him. His popularity was something that this other man, who seemingly had everything, could be envious of (cf. Niehaus 2005 for ideas about directions of accusations). It appeared, then, that Bold had not been the target of arson because he was seen to be accruing excessive wealth in the neo-liberal economy. Rather, he was targeted because of his popularity and potential power and influence in the district, marked by his vast network of friends.

From this account, we see how arson does not just dislocate people from their houses; it also humiliates by leaving people with a sense of being the target of someone else's agency. After such an attack, people are also forced to see their social relations in a different way. Each time it happens, people speculate as to causes and triggers, and form new alliances and factions. Instead of searching for a way to stop it, not confronting a single culprit (or cause) appears as a means by which people relate. In this sense, we may speak of arson as 'jolting people into new states', a concept reminiscent of Humphrey's (2008: 364) idea of the 'decision-event'. Drawing on Badiou's concept of the 'Event', Humphrey suggests that decisions can themselves be viewed as events. Such decision-events serve to break off earlier bodies of knowledge or re-jig them by forcing them to be seen in a new light. In a similar way, arson ruptures previous knowledge of the world and forces the person targeted to question their relations with others. We may speak of arson as being both a *revelatory* device—in the sense that the target is forced to see the world differently after the fire—and a *catalyst* for that revelation. Bold was a man whose life was defined by his being the target of fire. We may also say that he put himself together as a person in a different way after the fires, as a conscious act, or decision, to prevent further attack (that is, we can distinguish between 'Bold before the fire' and 'Bold after the fire').

Thinking of arson as an event recalls Veena Das's writing on 'critical events' (1995). Critical events are moments when everyday life is disrupted and shattered. More than singular moments, however, critical events leave a trace as they shape the lives of those who experience them and trigger new modes of action. Their effects may be expressed on many registers or scales (Das 1995). Following Das, Carsten (2007) notes that critical events are 'often apprehended and experienced at the time as chaotic and unexpected' (Carsten 2007: 4). In turn, accounts of them, such as Bold's narrative, may be

discontinuous and fragmented. Because of this, the meaning of these events cannot be accounted for in simple ways, partially because people themselves want to try to put such events behind them. The point I wish to stress with regard to Bold is that arson caused him to move away from the district, from his extended family and from his childhood friends. This ability of fire to generate movement is something I explore in the final part of this chapter.

The curse of fire

When arson is attributed to a variety of causes, it appears as a generic form of attack that encompasses a range of different motives. In contrast to the experience of arson as a specific kind of event that is confined to a singular moment, arson also appears as an omnipresent, swirling, and continuous threat that permeates people's interactions with each other on a daily basis (even when it has been physically absent for some time). Taking this view, we see a similarity between arson and the anthropological literature on gossip and cursing in Mongolia (Højer 2003; Swancutt 2006; Buyandelgeriyn 2007), and the literature on witchcraft accusation more generally (Englund 1996; Niehaus 2005). The effect of living under the threat of arson creates similar kinds of outcomes to those found among people who live with the uncertain fear of gossip, cursing, and witchcraft. In a fascinating chapter on the nature of 'gossip-spells' in Mongolia, Højer (2003) distinguishes informal gossip (*tsagaan / har hel am*, lit. black and white tongue mouth) from ordinary talk. Informal gossip, he explains, can bring about effects similar to curses (*haraal*). Similarly, High (2008) explains that informal gossip directly attacks the wealth that a household may have built up. Envy is therefore to be avoided since a jealous visitor can cause serious calamities for the hosting household (High 2008). As mentioned, the consequences of 'black gossip' (*har hel am*), such as people speaking badly of someone or arguing with someone, are similar to those of 'white gossip', or excessive praise (*tsagaan hel am*). Højer (2003) refers to informal 'black' and 'white' curse-like gossip as the 'witchcraft of ordinary life'. Spreading curse-like gossip does not require specialist knowledge and its outcome may affect someone without that person knowing exactly who is the source (Højer 2003).[18] In a similar

[18] With cursing, the person who sent a curse is often identified or suspected and is sometimes accused directly. Like gossip, the outcome of a curse can be varied, and it is this uncertainty that often makes cursing and the effects of gossip difficult to identify immediately. Indeed, although it may be known that a curse has been cast against someone, it may take some time before its effects are realized (Swancutt 2006).

way, arson in the district centre seemed to strike without a known single culprit or cause. Fire, like informal gossip, conceals its agent but reveals its target. The victim is illuminated for all to see. Living in a community where the agents of cursing or arson are concealed produces similar feelings of envy, resentment, and suspicion. Indeed, as we have seen with regard to ideas about the hearth-fire, gossip may cause the hearth-fire to become polluted, which in turn may leave one open to arson.

Focus on the circulation of envy, resentment, and suspicion is something that also permeates the anthropological literature on witchcraft (Englund 1996). Recent accounts of witchcraft link the rise of witchcraft accusations to wider political shifts and economic inequalities (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Witchcraft accusations in other, particularly post-colonial, parts of the world, appear as a means by which rural and urban people alike confront and question contemporary problems of modernity. Indeed, one way in which we might understand arson in Ashinga is as the result of post-socialist rupture and the outcome of a shift to a neo-liberal economy, in which some seem to accumulate wealth and fortune effortlessly, while others seem to have none of it at all. In response to new economic and social uncertainties, widespread suspicion and jealousy have increased as responsibilities previously carried by the state have become the burden of individual people.

Following this line of thought, it is striking that in recent years the target of arson has shifted from people's homes to buildings owned by young entrepreneurs who have opened a variety of shops and kiosks in the district centre (see, for example, the vignette presented at the beginning of this chapter). Reflecting on one of these fires, a woman commented to a group of us: 'It seems that young and economically wealthy people are being targeted now. The fire that happened last night, those people were just beginning their business and were doing very well.' By 2005, the fires were seen as being not so much about local political feuds, jealousy based on friendships, the acquisition of land, or inheritance disputes, but as a means by which competition between different shop-owners could be played out. Here, arson appears to be linked to wider structures of inequality that are emerging in the neo-liberal economy as entrepreneurs compete for domination of the market. And yet, while much social life in the past nineteen years can be seen as a rupture from the socialist world, I do not think that the sustained use of arson should be viewed solely as a means by which people struggle with problems caused by 'modern' inequalities. I think we should be mindful of using the concept 'modernity', as a singular analytic device, to explain these forms of social life (see Englund 1996; Englund and Leach 2000). While

all district centres in Mongolia can be said to be suffering similar upheavals and inequalities in the neo-liberal economy, the presence of arson is confined to Ashinga as a district. Arson appears here as a very local response, highlighting situated tensions and dynamics to do with growing inequality and more lingering senses of animosity.

Focusing on the processes by which material accumulation and prosperity are achieved, Englund (1996) shows how, among Dedza villagers in Malawi, witchcraft operates *within* modernity and questions ideas about the moral person (that is, witchcraft is not simply to be interpreted as *about* modernity) (Englund 1996: 260). He presents two contrasting ways in which people accumulate wealth and fortune. Morally acceptable ways of accumulating wealth involve revealing the dependent relationships that have made, and continue to make, accumulation possible (Englund 1996). In order to make these relations visible, an enterprising person engages in public acts of gift-giving and feasting, distributing portions of their wealth to others. In contrast, despised forms of accumulation derive from the perception of the entrepreneur as a selfish individual, that is, as someone who does not honour the constitutive relations that have facilitated wealth through gift-giving and feasting, but rather hoards wealth for him- or herself, thereby ignoring the different relations that made their wealth possible. When people ignore the relations that have facilitated wealth, they become open to the possibility of witchcraft. Englund argues that witchcraft discourses, therefore, appear as occasions to contest and manage the images of the person as a moral being (Englund 1996). Witchcraft in Malawi revolves less around the propriety of accumulating wealth and profit-making in a neo-liberal economy than around the 'specific *means by which the profit is gained* and the *uses to which it is put*' (Englund 1996: 271, italics added).

Englund's point that witchcraft accusations appear as occasions to contest and manage images of the person as a moral being appears pertinent. Arson similarly seems to revolve around competing moralities of accumulation. Among herding families, monetary wealth is not something displayed in static forms. Rather it is something that, once gained, is distributed and channelled into other, mostly mobile, forms. Nuts, berries, and hunting produce gathered from the forest, for example, are quickly sold on to traders in order to facilitate other activities. The speed with which this is undertaken is not simply because some of these activities are classed as illegal, but because any bad fortune which results from the killing of wild animals must not be allowed to linger and take effect. In 2003, for instance, when Dorj returned from a successful hunt and sold the produce, he quickly used the money to replace his broken tooth and purchase thick material for winter clothing.

The rest went towards his sister's university fees, and to his mother, who was in charge of purchasing goods such as flour and sugar for the household. Wealth generated through such sales is immediately distributed in the household.

Wealth that is visible among herding households in the countryside also appears and then disappears in the mobile herds that traverse the landscape, sometimes at great distance from where people themselves are located. Accumulation of this kind of wealth is considered commendable and an obvious outcome of people's hard work and labour. It is also tied to the successful management of people's relations with the invisible land masters (Chapter 2). Here, custody over land, in order to accumulate fortune in livestock, is gained through offerings and through the successful management of one's position as a custodian rather than an outright owner of land. In relation to the idea of wealth as mobile and distributable, Humphrey (2002a) notes that the Mongolian term '*höröngö*' (property, capital) also conveys the idea of 'a series of growing, transforming things, parallel to the reproductive human kin relations created over generations' (Humphrey 2002a: 71), such as herds of animals which can be divided and distributed among family members. 'This organic, familially negotiated, share-based imagining of property is very different from systems in which "property" is mainly thought of as fixed items belonging to individuals' (Humphrey 2002a: 71). Similarly, Sneath (2002) explains that, in contrast to the private property of neoliberal economies in which property is viewed as something personalized, isolated, and apolitical, Mongol concepts of property are often conceived of as shares of a whole.

In contrast, in the district centre, monetary wealth (rather than wealth in children and herds) is often used to invest in static sites of accumulation, such as houses, shops, and kiosks. Static forms of wealth such as these are often viewed as commendable but also somehow, at least by some, as morally ambiguous. First, accumulating wealth in these visible sites contrasts with the accumulation of wealth among nomadic pastoralists. Wealth in the form of buildings draws attention to individuals who can afford to build and maintain them, rather than pointing to a group of people's shared ownership of the livestock that they tend. Unlike herds that grow and multiply, these building are often not distributable (at least not in the same way), nor do they expand to accumulate more wealth. Secondly, in the district centre it is not always clear what activities or exactly which relations went into the accumulation of this kind of wealth. Here, people seem to gain the means by which to purchase certain objects without visibly exchanging with others. Accumulation in such static sites often conceals the means by which

Figure 8.4 Preparing curds for sale.

Figure 8.5 Pastureland.

this wealth has been generated.[19] These aspects frequently make the appearance of stationary forms of wealth appear morally suspect. In short, accumulating wealth of this kind stands against the idea that wealth is something to be gained through collective activities and can be distributed and shared.

Such forms of wealth also resonate with those emerging in Mongolian cities. When I was in Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar, with friends from Ashinga, for instance, we would sometimes stop and wonder in awe at the 'rich lambs' (*hurgan bayan*, a term used to describe the 'nouveau riche'), who could be seen passing through the streets in their large, blacked-out four-by-four jeeps towards their exclusive villas, or exchanging wads of money for lavish banquets in Korean restaurants. In Mongolia's present-day open market economy, such forms of wealth are a visible feature of what some Mongols have termed 'wild capitalism' (*zerleg kapitalizm*, in contrast to forms of 'developed capitalism', *högjingüi kapitalizm*), where some appear to have gained money as if from nowhere, while others have none. The turns of fortune involved in the accumulation of this kind of wealth are often judged as suspect. While people may aspire to be like the 'new rich', many also recognize that in order to become one of them they must, it is assumed, engage in immoral transactions.[20] Somebody, somewhere, it is often claimed, must have been seriously cheated in order to secure these possessions. In a political era that is characterized as being ruthless or 'wild', the opportunity to accrue wealth is recognized as something one must seize whenever it arises, lest one is never presented with the chance again.

This idea of the morality or immorality of accumulation must, of course, be seen historically. During the socialist period, items that might generally be thought of as private property, such as houses and vehicles, were communally owned (Humphrey 2002b: 72), but through long-term use and

[19] In the early 2000s, people were able to register themselves as 'custodians' of the land on which their house was placed in the district centre. This led to much confusion over who could claim which plots, what would happen on plots that were not currently inhabited, how far the boundaries of the district extended, and how many people in each family could make such a claim. Once plots had been registered to particular people, it was common to wake up in the morning to see that one's neighbour had been especially productive during the night, relocating their fences a few metres in different directions and thereby claiming more land.

[20] Some assets associated with the new rich are valued, but others are considered useless. For example, Delgermaa returned from one visit to her daughter in the city with a whitening face powder and claimed that, having seen women her own age use it, she would attempt to give it a try too. But the intense sexualization of young women in the city, such as wearing five-inch high-heeled boots and ball gowns to purchase daily food supplies, was viewed by many women as not just highly impractical, but also terrifyingly excessive (*gangan*) in some way.

engagement, such objects came to be attributed to particular individuals (Humphrey 2002a: 73). Although such objects were communally owned, a contrast was made between wealth that was shared and those objects that took on some property-like assets for those who lived with and used them. This contrast, suggests Humphrey (2002a), is part of the way that private property is often imagined as personal property in Mongolia. To own something is not simply a matter of purchasing; rather, to own something one has to have used and engaged with it for a long time. In this sense, the object is said to be attached to you (while also holding on to some part of you).

Prior to the socialist period considerable prestige was attached to having numerous herds, and certain noble lords were acclaimed for their wealth. Similarly, in the present day, some herders in Ashinga are known as 'herders with over a thousand animals' (*myangat malchin*) and their skill at herding is something that is respected and admired. While people are quick to blame the 'new rich' for gaining wealth through morally suspect means, they frequently praise wealthy herders. Wealth in herds is attributed to the herder's dedicated work at raising them. In relation to this, it is important to stress that the people do not view the accumulation of all wealth as immoral. Rather, it is certain forms of new wealth, such as those displayed through ostentatious houses and cars in the district centre, that are judged as immoral against the background of socialist egalitarianism, which was the basis for the development of the district in the first place. When the poor target the rich, or local state buildings are attacked, arson appears less to revolve around the propriety of accumulating wealth and profit-making in a neo-liberal economy, than to challenge the means by which wealth is gained and the uses to which that wealth and power is put. Like the Buriad concept of fire that separates off or cleanses people, morally ambiguous means of acquiring wealth and power in the district centre, which go against previous ideas of social equality, are challenged and destroyed through arson.[21] Arson appears as a confrontation of different 'moral orders',

[21] The idea that arson is a means by which people question wealth as an index of the individual could be seen analogously with the thrill of seeing this wealth exposed as vulnerable to the simple everyday element of fire. While people may think they are secure in their private homes, potential exposure to fire is a powerful counterpart to their own, more fragile, means of securing power through private property. Along these lines, Canetti (1962) has commented that arsonists often like watching their fires because it attracts attention, but they equally crave the possible attention to themselves as people that this fire may expose. Fire then appears as a means by which people draw attention to themselves as individuals. Generating the gaze that fire causes, the arsonist becomes the fire (Canetti 1962: 79–80).

each constituting the bases for different ways of relating (Howell 1997: 2). I suggest that arson is a means by which people challenge the way in which wealth is gained and the uses to which this wealth is put. Here, fire consumes the consumption it critiques, and conceals its causes as it appears to critique the concealment of the means of accumulation of wealth that it destroys.

As far as I can ascertain, arson is not an indigenous form of attack among the Buriad, nor is it common in the rest of Mongolia (although it is sometimes used as a form of political protest—see, for example, the election protests of 2008). Yet its effects are similar to those produced by indigenous forms of cursing and gossip-spells. In light of this, we may ask why, in a modern setting, cursing and gossip-spells are not enough. Or rather, why cursing and gossip-spells take the form of arson. I suggest that arson provides an extra element that is not always obvious with cursing and gossip-spells, namely *public* humiliation. Unlike cursing and gossip-spells, arson makes the target of an attack visible to everyone in the community. Making certain people visible and singling them out echoes similar experiences of the open market economy (and Soviet persecution). There is a stark, and very visible, contrast between those who have accumulated wealth and those who have not (both monetary wealth and that in livestock). The rupture between the poor and the rich is exposed and visible for all to see. This division contrasts with the socialist period, but not, from what we can gather from historical accounts, so much with the pre-socialist period.

The fact that it is houses, which are invested with people's new-found wealth, that are the targets of arson leads me to suggest that it is the accumulation of wealth in private property, as something owned by individuals, that is, in part, what is being challenged by arson. As a form of dispute settlement (or moral purification), arson can be said to be a new version of the state, in the absence of its Soviet form. It takes without warning and seems to strike randomly. Similarly, some people seem to accumulate wealth and prosperity randomly while others do not. By saying that arson is a substitute for state forms I do not mean that it mimics Soviet forms of power. Rather, by focusing on the way in which people shift between indigenous ideas about fire, gossip-spells, and hauntings, and modern quandaries concerning ideas about property and the means by which people accumulate wealth, we see how arson appears as a local way of struggling with very modern problems. Drawing on Bataille (1991), we may say that arson destroys the 'surplus energy' or 'excess' (the accursed shared) that is left over after basic subsistence had been satisfied, in a kind of ritual expenditure that mocks the idea of wealth in private property and those who think they own it. Undercutting the private accumulation of capital, arson releases the excesses of the emerging rich and replaces them with the ethics of a relational kinship order and obligations to distribute (cf. Yang 2000). In this sense, the house and its contested ownership becomes the manifestation of the 'accursed share', the surplus destined for violence or consumption. When subjected to destruction through fire it is consumed, not into the body of the sacrificer, but by the fire itself (Bataille 1991: 58–9).[22]

Initiating movement

I have attempted to address an aspect of social life that people find unsettling and difficult. It is something that they would like to hide from the gaze of others as well as from themselves. Like relations that are concealed inside the household chest, relations generated through arson are something that people want to be separated from. The district centre, as an administrative hub, appears like the centre of the chest that contains a collection of various pieces that generates movement outside this centre. People in the countryside draw on relations in the district centre in order that they may acquire

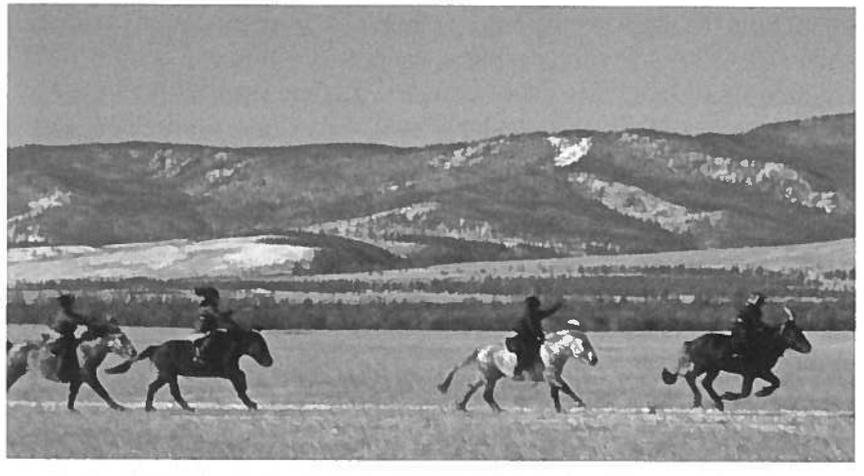

Figure 8.6 Families race their horses at the New Year race.

[22] The harnessed portions of fortune that I have been describing may also be viewed as the surplus energy or excess that can be put to use in a ritual economy. I should be clear that in making this analogy, I am not suggesting that people 'offer' their houses to arson (as they do sheep for sacrifice), but they do run the risk that a building will be the subject of destruction as arson squanders their sites of prestige.

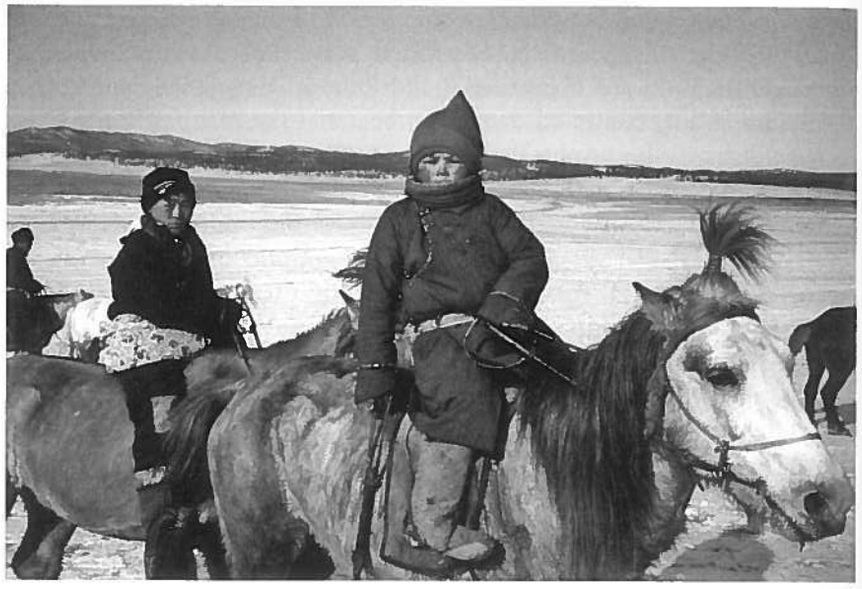

Figure 8.7 Children race horses at the New Year celebration.

goods from the shops, receive support from local government, and send their children to school. In turn, people in the district centre rely on those in the countryside to look after their herds, and procure essential food products, such as meat and milk. Like the household chest which needs the separated pieces in order for the stable relations on its surface to exist, these two spheres are dependent on each other for their own existence.

Fire is a source that spans between them, but it relies on an ambiguous agency that creates another kind of tension. On the one hand, fire is something to be worshipped. When held together in the site of the hearth, it embodies continuity over generations, and is a source of fortune and power that protects and generates growth in the household. In stark contrast, when this fire is brought outside the house, it is used to dislocate people from the sites in which they have invested their wealth and the places in which they live. While fortune and fire are both held to generate growth, the means by which they are contained determines whether they are productive or destructive. In order to be productive, we have seen that fortune needs to be contained. Similarly, for fire to be a source of protection it needs to remain contained within a single hearth.

I have suggested that the act of arson cuts people off from each other and destroys their points of accumulation, such as the house, the household chest,

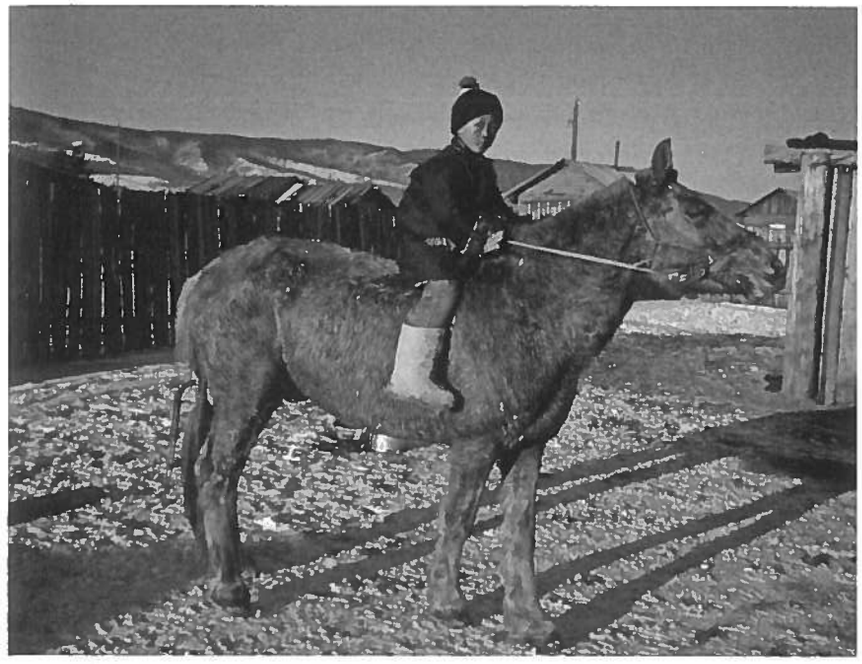

Figure 8.8 After the horse race.

and the hearth. While the structure of the building as an architectural form is valued, from the example presented at the beginning of this chapter we see that what was of utmost importance during the fire was that parts of the household's interior, and in particular the household chest with all its carefully gathered pieces, such as the tail hairs, umbilical cords, and cots, which are held to harness fortune to a household, were saved from the blaze. If these were saved, I was told, a new house could always be rebuilt. Because loss of accumulated fortune is so threatening to people, destruction of the household chest is the most direct way to bring this about. Burning down each other's houses is not simply a comment on the means of accumulating and distributing wealth. It is also to separate or detach people very physically from their containers of fortune and the form that fortune takes.

As we have seen, fortune is not always linked to wealth and assets, such as private property or herds, but also to capacities, such as fertility and vitality. In this sense, fortune is a facilitating element, or feature, that can take the form of varied kinds of assets, which may include private property, as well as herds and aspects of people. To burn down someone's house, and the pieces contained within it, is a very visible act of humiliation that renders the

victim lacking in multiple ways. At a time of increasing inequalities in wealth, people are concerned with harnessing fortune as an element that will ensure success in different spheres. They have to be careful in how they do this, however, lest the accumulation of too much fortune invites its polar opposite: misfortune. In this regard, it is perhaps not surprising that the word for arson in Mongolian (*shataah*) is also the word for bankruptcy, and is applied specifically to the loss of monetary wealth.[23] It is often used as a curse word that may be uttered on those to whom one wants to bring misfortune and destruction. Bankruptcy, like arson, becomes the visible manifestation of the way misfortune appears to strike someone randomly with devastating effects. The act of arson may be viewed as a very literal way of detaching people from their fortune. It is also a more general comment on the mistrust generated by new ways of accumulating wealth and on the dangers of excess. While people cannot steal each other's fortune, they can destroy its manifestation in various forms. Burning down houses in the district centre is one way to detach people from their sites of accumulated fortune, thereby separating or releasing this fortune and making it mobile. Through fire, accumulated fortune is set free.

While people have to learn to separate themselves from the intensity of housing another in intra-kin rebirths, fire separates people from their accumulations and reshuffles social relations in the district. It also initiates another kind of movement, as people tend not to build on the same plot where a house was burnt down. We have seen that fire does not index a single referent or agent and it appears as though Ashinga, as a community, is committing arson against itself as it attempts to resolve and cut through various disputes and tensions. Like the hidden pieces that are separated and then contained inside the household chest, the agent of fire is concealed. Echoing themes in previous chapters about a tension between the internal and the external, and what is visible and what is hidden, I suggest that arson generates growth and transformation outside itself.

At the centre of Ashinga is the need for movement—away from the past, from the impenetrable moral gaze of one's neighbours, and from the closeness that characterizes those relations from which one must be separated. On the day in September 2007 when I left Ashinga for the final time, full electricity supply (that is, twenty-four hours a day) arrived in the district centre. The local government arranged a ceremony with Buddhist monks

[23] The term '*shataah*' is used to refer to something that burns completely and is destroyed or lost. In contrast the term '*tüleh*' is used to refer to something that is scorched or partially burnt, and has a positive connotation such as burning firewood in the stove.

to welcome the continuous illumination and everyone seemed overjoyed by the promise of its potential. It was hoped that the luminosity that had singled out and destroyed some would now finally be transformed, replaced, managed, and distributed to all. Since the arrival of around-the-clock electricity, no further arson attacks have occurred. Enchanted by the opportunities afforded by a continuous electricity supply, people appear to see their district centre in a new light (literally). With televisions permanently switched on to channels showing Korean soap operas about the traumas of urban city dwellers and the tribulations of young lovers, a window on to another world has been opened and it seems that people are no longer obsessed with observing and judging each other's movements. No longer is the district centre merely the remnant of a past utopian Soviet project. A different potential is being realized as people begin to transform the place on new terms.