



Recording traditional treatments

Tash Fijn packs her woollies and heads north with her camera

There has been a long tradition in using first film and now video in anthropology as a means of collecting the data, but also as a means of communication. As part of my research, I can produce documentaries or shorter film clips as part of the project, but I also use video as a field method because it is a good means of recording: you get the visuals and the audio, sort of multiple purposes really. There is a whole sub-discipline within anthropology, which is called visual cultural research.

I have received an international fellowship through the Wenner-Foundation, and so my income for this project for next year will be from the Wenner-Gren. The Fejos fellowship is especially for filmmaking and visual anthropology.



My PhD and my fieldwork was on Mongolia, mainly on the processes of domestication — human/animal relations. One really interesting element I found in the field was that herders use medicinal treatments for the family and the herd animals just about every day. With a herd of a hundred sheep and goats, one, two or three of them will have something wrong with them. If they have a cold, or weeping eyes, the herders will treat them themselves, often because they cannot rely on the availability of veterinary care or because it is often too expensive.

Previously when I was in Mongolia, I was in two different field locations in the Khangai Mountains, one in Arkhangai province and the other in Bulgan province, in two family herding encampments. To us, they are remote locations — vast landscapes, sparsely populated, within broad river valleys. I intend to return to Bulgan Aimag because the women would collect a lot of traditional herbs from the surrounding area and there was a lot of medicinal treatment happening on a daily basis that I witnessed last time, but ... things may have changed. I am going to go back to see experts I talked with in August this year, so they might have some ideas about where I should go, where there'd be a really knowledgeable person that I should go to see in other locations.

Mongolia used to be a satellite state of the Soviet Union and with the collapse of the Soviet era, there was not enough government funding to support veterinary care at a town level. Herders were more or less left to themselves, so they reverted back to traditional means of treating themselves and their herd animals. In autumn the women would go up into the surrounding mountainsides. There are different zones in Mongolia, the grassland steppe and the Gobi desert but there is also the mountainous kind of taiga landscape, where there are medicinal herbs.

We lived in gers — there is the occasional ger here in



Australia — they are amazing kind of structures. They are rounded, really warm in winter. In spring there are huge temperature fluctuations of about 30° Celsius, it might be minus 20° during the morning and then it will fluctuate to plus 10° later in the day. The winter is so cold that it won't even snow, but in spring you get snow storms and things like that, so I need to be there next year when the weather's more changeable and kind of harder-going!

In the autumn they'd go up and collect a variety of medicinal herbs, dry them and then use them throughout the year (so I also need to go back for a few weeks in autumn next year). They have little cloth bags that they put all their medicinal herbs in. I found that element really interesting and so now, with this current project, I am wanting to really focus on that: how do the herders treat their own family and the herd animals, and what kind of medicinal techniques do they use? Do they rely on scientific medical care if it's available, or do they use shamanic, or Buddhist teachings. There is a strong Buddhist tradition in traditional Mongolian medicine. Some monks might train for years and years to become medical experts and there are still strong Buddhist underpinnings in Mongolia.

The herders go to these monks and ask for a ritual ceremony or their wisdom, but then there is also the knowledgeable herders themselves. There are particular elders who are really knowledgeable about how to treat wolf bite or in the practices of blood-letting, or bone-setting.

There is still a strong oral tradition, so the knowledge will be passed down from one generation to another. In a lot of parts of the world, like in Tibetan cultural areas, the knowledge has been lost, perhaps because of the political climate, or fractured cultural aspects. But because Mongolia has not been colonised and is more intact in a way, in a cultural sense, a lot of those traditions have been ongoing.

The trouble is that some of the really knowledgeable elders may pass away soon, so I feel like I need to record some of this knowledge now. There is so much that has not been recorded- some existing academic texts haven't been translated into English. There are some ancient Mongolian Buddhist texts that are very rare, perhaps only one remaining copy that people rely on, and so part of the larger project is not just my filmmaking but would be the digitalisation and translation of some of this precious text-based material.

My focus for next year is going to be on making this documentary and going around and actually engaging with

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