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Exemplary differences: ethnicity, mythic histories, and essentialism in Khovd, Mongolia

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This article provides an ethnographic account of understandings of 'ethnic' difference in Khovd province, Mongolia. It attempts to use said material to challenge the terms of debate within the current concern with 'essentialism' in social theory. It is in agreement with constructivist-inspired observations by anthropologists that so-called ethnic groups in Mongolia exist partly as ideological ascriptions arising from historical and contemporary political interests. Yet there is an intellectual tension, which sees the anthropologist engaged in the politically important task of the de-essentialization of identities, on behalf of people who claim said identities as their *essence*. This article neither accepts ethnic groups as somehow unproblematically real, nor positions such ideas purely as a target for deconstruction. Rather, it provides an account of times when moralized understandings of ethnic difference in the medium of mythic-historical exemplars are mobilized and examines their impact on social life. It shows that certain forms of essentialism may contain affordances that amplify social and political possibilities, rather than violently close them down. The final provocation is that anthropologists and social theorists would do better to examine the precise nature and effects of particular instances of essentialism rather than instinctively demolish them in general.

'What do you know about that man?', asked Zorig, his palm facing the sky as he gestured towards the statue before him. We stood in front of the main government building of Khovd city, a province capital, in the far west of Mongolia. I squinted across the square, lit by the midsummer sun, my eyes struggling to recalibrate to the sudden change in brightness, and my mind to the unexpected turn our conversation had taken. 'That's Galdan Boshugtu Khan', I replied. 'He was a powerful leader who fought the … Manchus'. My hesitation stemmed from the fact that I was unsure if this conversation was about to follow a somewhat familiar path into mythic-historical accounts of Mongolians killing Chinese people. In this case, however, a different schism of 'us' and 'them' was opening up.

'Yes, yes, he killed many Chinese', Zorig replied dismissively. 'He was a strong man. But what is important is that he also fought the central Mongols. Do you know this?' Unlike the many other conversations in which I had taken part back in Ulaanbaatar, where I had spent the first year of my fieldwork, this one did not stress the unity of

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the Mongols. While almost any Mongol Khan can be historically shown to have fought other Mongols, it was unusual for me to hear them talked about in this way in the capital. 'This is what I told you about earlier', interjected Munkherdene, a friend of Zorig I had met that day. 'The central Mongols have forgotten their culture. We all have Chinggis Khaan [Genghis Khan], but the central people do not have Galdan Khan'.

We soon reached our destination next to the wall that marked the boundary of the last *hashaa* (fenced compound) before the town gave way to open space and the river. There, I attempted to return to the topic of 'central' Mongols by simply asking Munkherdene what he thought of them. Perhaps noting my own experimental mimicry of his slippage between the term for 'central Mongol' (*töviin mongol*) and the ethnic majority *Khalkha* Mongol, he attempted to clarify: 'We have many *Khalkha* people here, many different ethnicities (*yastan*). We even have Kazakh friends! There are many different people, but we have Galdan. We know how to unify. We haven't forgotten our traditions or our legends (*domog*). We live all together in peace'.

I will return to the manner in which historical and mythic figures become salient in everyday attributions of moral personhood, yet for now, the kind of work Zorig's and Munkherdene's words are doing should be noted. First, they stress a sharp division between 'western' and 'central' Mongols, represented here by references to a different history and the perception that central Mongols had 'forgotten' much. Yet their words also draw attention to the internal diversity of 'western Mongols', as shown by the seemingly harmonious picture of Mongols of various ethnic backgrounds living with Kazakhs without strife. This seemingly harmonious picture of difference can be better illustrated (or challenged) through the description of the rest of that afternoon's events, which saw Munkherdene's harmonious image fracture as the evening drew in.

As the day wore on, we returned to Zorig's *hashaa* to eat his wife's *tsuivan* (fried flour noodles). Sitting in the small wooden house, we ate largely in silence, before filling our now empty bowls with the slightly salted milk tea routinely served in almost every home in the country. As we drank, Zorig's wife informed him that her older sister and her husband had arrived and were now in the *ger* (felt yurt) that stood in the *hashaa* outside. We soon found ourselves inside the *ger* toasting their safe arrival. However, the hospitality quickly took on a more unpleasant tone. It was not long before Zorig and his brother-in-law, Davaa, were screaming at each other over a superficial disagreement, the foundation of which was hard to track amongst the angry accusations. In this case, however, idiom was perhaps more important than root, and various forms of ethnic language were deployed. Zorig and his wife were from different *yastan* and so were considered a 'mixed' marriage, meaning that the normal ambiguous and perhaps threatening nature of in-laws was compounded with difference at an ethnic register. At moments such as this, I would recall the informal and important warnings from anthropologists of Mongolia that I should not go into the countryside and 'invent an ethnic group', or essentialize identities constructed by socialist and Soviet, and Chinese and imperial interests, to produce division and justify rule. Yet I wondered how to reconcile this important warning against reification of ethnic identity with the empirical reality of the two men standing before me: one screaming, 'You behave like this because you are *Zakhchin*!' and the other, 'You are *Dörvöd,* you don't know the legends of my homeland, so you are like a child!'

This article provides an ethnographic account of understandings of 'ethnic' difference in Khovd province, Mongolia, and attempts to use said material to challenge the terms of debate within the current impasse over the place of 'essentialism' in social theory. It is in complete agreement with constructivist-inspired observations by anthropologists that so-called ethnic groups in Mongolia exist partly as ideological ascriptions and fictitious claims arising from historical and contemporary political interests. To accept such ethnicities at face value and incorporate them into analysis as if they were straightforwardly real would be naïve at best and dangerously exoticist at worst. Indeed, the systematic demolition of such essentialist accounts of social groups might be said to be one of the towering achievements of both anthropology and related disciplines in the last four decades. And yet, as the opening vignette attests, while anthropology might congratulate itself for the ongoing eradication of such depictions, the existence of self-identifications with, and ascription to, essentialist ethnic identities thought to account for the behaviour of certain people remains *an ethnographic fact*. There is an unresolved tension which sees the anthropologist engaged in the politically important task of the de-essentialization of identities on behalf of people who claim said identities as their *essence*. I will suggest there are potentially damaging implications to this.

This article neither accepts ethnic groups as somehow unproblematically real, nor renders such ideas purely as a target for deconstruction. Rather, it provides an account of times when moralized (and essentialized) understandings of ethnic difference are mobilized and examines the discursive content of such claims in terms of their impact on social life. Its object of analysis, then, is the contexts in which ideas of ethnic essence are mobilized, deployed, and *invented*. It will show that in Khovd province this is enabled through the referencing of historical figures and geographically located myths that 'exemplify' and generate both explanations and exacerbations of difference between groups of people in Mongolia. This article presents three such mythic histories which operate at increasingly intimate scales of difference: between Kazakhs and Mongols, across varied Mongol ethnicities, and within kin groups.

Crucially, I argue that these mythic-historical exemplars not only *allow* space for the elaboration of diverse ideas of difference, but also, owing to their multivalent content, *demand* it. I argue that such a moral historicity is itself the key characteristic of ethnicity in Mongolia, one that has particularly clear implications for our concern with essentialism. It is the contention of this article that essentialism has (rightly) become a dirty word within anthropology. Yet this has had the effect of blocking a sustained consideration as to what it actually *does* in social life. Its malignance is assumed prior to analysis. In contrast to this, the ethnographic material I present in this article suggests essentialist ascriptions and identifications have a more complicated social impact than one we might think, and as such the reflex to deconstruct them might not be as politically virtuous as could otherwise be assumed. Yet more than this, and perhaps counterintuitively, this article also suggests that essentialism itself might not be as automatically *reductive* as it appears. Rather, certain forms of essentialism may afford divergent interpretations that amplify social and political possibilities, rather than violently close them down. The final provocation is that anthropologists and social theorists would do better to examine the precise nature and effects of particular instances of essentialism, ethnographic and theoretical, rather than instinctively demolish them in general.

Ethnicity in Mongolia

Mongolia, a landlocked country sandwiched between Russia and China, has spent much of its recent history in the orbit of external powers, and hence has been subject to varied ascriptions, ethnic and otherwise. It had submitted to the Qing Empire by the end of the seventeenth century and spent the following two centuries ruled by Beijing through an administrative system of theocratic and aristocratic estates (Bawden 1968; Sneath 2007). Following the fall of the Qing dynasty, Mongolia declared independence, and after a tumultuous decade declared the socialist state of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924. Unsurprisingly, given the Red Army had been instrumental in securing Mongolia's independence, the country was legally independent from, but economically and ideologically heavily dependent upon, the Soviet Union. Accordingly, following Perestroika in the USSR in the 1980s, generalized discontent led to mass protests and a largely peaceful transition to parliamentary democracy. Like many countries within the orbit of the USSR, IMF- and World Bank-initiated reforms led to mass privatization, economic uncertainty, and a shift towards a new form of market capitalism during the 1990s, which echo to this day. The modern nation-state of Mongolia is composed of around 95 per cent Mongols and 5 per cent Kazakhs. Legally – and, as will be shown, socially – Mongols are divided between the overwhelming majority Khalkha Mongols and those members of numerous other 'ethnic groups' (*yastan*). Crucially, as was made clear in the ethnographic opening, the province of Khovd, in the far west of the country, is famous throughout Mongolia for its concentration of many different *yastan*.

The anthropological study of particular *yastan* in Mongolia has been relatively common, at least indirectly. Because *yastan* are concentrated in particular areas of rural Mongolia, studies of a topic in any one place tend to de facto become studies of a given *yastan*. The clearest instantiation of this is the number of monographs written on the revival of shamanism in the country, most of which have concentrated on *Buriad* (Buyandelger 2013; Shimamura 2014) or *Darhad* (Hangartner 2009; Pedersen 2011) shamans. It is crucial to note here that the categories of *Buriad* or *Darhad* are not the objects of analysis of these authors' work and are instead treated as a piece of the ethnographic context. This is hardly surprising given that *Buriad* and *Darhad* shamans consider their practices to be ethnically distinct traditions. Yet categories of *yastan* are often accepted at face value and incorporated into accounts of the country, even if this fact has recently come under sustained critique.

David Sneath and Uradyn Bulag have provided the most substantial and important intervention in the matter of Mongolian 'ethnicity'. Rightly arguing that the categories of *yastan* that are used in contemporary Mongolia emerged during imperial rule and Soviet domination, they warn against the uncritical use of such categories, which they frame partly as historical ascriptions employed by state-like entities as divide-and-rule strategies (Bulag 1998; Sneath 2007). When compounded by the fact that *yastan* remain a matter of nation-building in contemporary Mongolia, Sneath argues that 'we can see collective identities in Mongolia as discursive claims, rather than a series of "social building blocks"' (2010: 262). To fail to do so would be to commit a dangerous act of essentialization that reduces people to what are actually *claims* and *ascriptions* of identity. Yet, as the opening vignette attested, one is still left with a dilemma when these claims and self-identifications of ethnicity are *themselves* claims of essence. Such deconstructive efforts are of course not limited to Mongolia, and a theoretical tension generated by well-grounded fears of the danger of essentialism has characterized much work on the anthropological theorization of ethnicity.

The roots of essentialism in anthropological theory

The rise and fall of the anthropological concern with ethnicity and ethnic groups tracks theoretical developments in the discipline as a whole. Here, I provide brief history of the concept. I argue that the progressive moves to steer clear of essentialist conceptions of 'tribes', while undoubtedly producing a more accurate and rounded view of human groups, have failed to address emic claims of common origins. Critically, I suggest that such moves have never resolved the inherent tension in approaches that describe ethnicity in constructivist terms despite the fact it is often experienced as given in ethnographic reality. As a result, primordialist and essentialist tendencies have re-emerged despite widespread agreement on their potential for political and conceptual harm.

Accounts of the burgeoning study of ethnicity in the 1970s and 1980s tend to portray it as a reaction to previous anthropological depictions of primordial, bounded, and static tribes found in structural-functionalist approaches (Baumann 1996; R. Cohen 1978; Williams 1989). This conception, commonly identified in the work of Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940), stemmed from a model of non-state, kinship-based societies with origins in earlier, evolutionist ideas about non-Western peoples (Kuper 1988; Sneath 2007). The rise of the explicit study of ethnicity was partly prefigured by certain members of the Manchester school, who examined, amongst other topics, the persistence of tribal affiliations in colonial and postcolonial Africa (Epstein 1958; Mitchell 1969). Most famously, Abner Cohen's (1969) argument that the Hausa people insisted on tribal difference in order to retain their favourable position in the cattle trade stands as a classically instrumentalist understanding of ethnic self-ascription being deployed for strategic economic ends.

It was the publication of Fredrik Barth's edited volume *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (1998 [1969]), building upon his famous account of the Swat regions of Pakistan, that promised a full escape from primordialist conceptions of tribal solidarity. Barth argued that ethnic groups everywhere were socially constructed, and that rather than focusing on the content of normative ethnic behaviour, anthropologists should look at boundary maintenance in the context of interaction between non-bounded groups. This book is often heralded as a moment in which the study of ethnicity was opened up and broke from renderings of timeless, ahistorical, 'cold' societies. Yet there was also an unresolved ambiguity that played out in later work on ethnicity. Barth argued that the construction of ethnicity involved both categories of identification for the people within an ethnic group and forms of ascription by other groups with which those people interacted. This unresolved tension recurs throughout the literature: between a primordialist view of self-determination and a situationist view of ethnic groups arising in reaction to political contexts.

Perhaps most influentially in the United Kingdom, Gerd Baumann (1996) examined how 'demotic' forms of self-identification played out in contrast to top-down ascriptions of community and culture. Similarly, other accounts grappled with how ethnicities 'constructed' within particular political contexts were nevertheless intimately identified with by those to whom such identifications were meant to apply (Geertz 1973; Hanson 1989; McDonald 1989). While some anthropologists highlighted that their interlocutors themselves held more fluid, constructivist views of difference (Astuti 1995; Hale 2015), these turned out to be the exception rather than the rule. This situation was heightened by the later rise of identity politics, in the United States and elsewhere, which mobilized an emic concept of culture every bit as essentialized, and indeed racialized, as the etic, structural-functionalist models of 'bounded tribes' (Fassin 2001; Gleason 1983). We thus see a familiar refrain whereby efforts to transcend 'ethnic' identities are doubled by the need to account for claims of essential categories. Indeed, while we are now firmly outside the sphere of authors who explicitly discuss 'ethnicity', certain contemporary accounts of ontological politics have been accused of being primordialist assertions of essential difference (Candea 2010; Vigh & Sausdal 2014).

It is perhaps surprising that decades after anthropology discovered the dangers of essentialism it continues to haunt contemporary accounts. Indeed the literature laid out above seems to reflect an eternal return to essentialist tendencies in a discipline overwise committed to challenging them. I suggest that this habit stems from an unresolved tension that dooms us to this cycle of the repetition and rediscovery of essentialism in anthropological accounts. While the wider 'constructivist hegemony' (Wimmer 2013) seems to demonstrate the distortions that primordialist accounts give of social life, the picture may be rather more muddy. Rather, I argue that there has been an undeclared and indecisive victory whereby constructivist approaches are thought to be universally superior for accounts of human existence *without even showing this to be the case.* Critically, even if one *does* hold them to be the most appropriate heuristics for analysis, this has led them to lose their force precisely because they are taken for granted (Brubaker 2014). Conversely, this has also black-boxed the 'sin' of essentialism and transformed it into an *accusation* and a dirty word that as a result doesn't require actual analysis. Even if one is entirely convinced of its dangers, this places us in an uneasy situation whereby our theoretical descriptions of the world clash with the persistence of essentialism in practice. Our righteous stance is confounded by ethnographic reality (Wimmer 2013: 2).

Some have attempted to explain this 'persistence of essentialism' (Astuti 2022) by framing it as a pattern in human perception and classification, a species-level cognitive tendency (Brubaker 2002; Brubaker, Loveman & Stamatov 2004; Gil-White 2001). Perhaps unsurprisingly, such work has provoked a roar of accusations of essentialism (e.g. Ingold in Gil-White 2001). Regardless of one's stance on whether humans have *any* tendencies of this sort, the danger of basing analysis on them having a *particular* tendency is a clear point of contention. This article does not make any claims as to the reasons for essentialism's persistence. However, it does suggest looking again at this dirty word. In axiomatically assuming its inappropriateness as an explanation, whether within the academy or outside it, we may have missed some of its full social import, for better *and* for worse. This article proposes to meet the tension outlined above head on. There are wider implications of this line of thought.

Clearly, the canon relevant to the study of ethnicity has been one of the many arenas in which anthropologists grappled with the spectre of essentialism. As such, the intellectual history has relevance to huge swathes of anthropological work, and to the rise of essentialism outside of academia today. Yet even as essentialism was theoretically exorcized in anthropology and related disciplines through the last four decades, authors often remark with despair on the persistence or even increase of essentialist understandings in 'multiculturalist' societies (Grillo 2003). This includes essentialist representations of others, but also self-identification with essential categories of identity (Kurzwelly, Rapport & Spiegel 2020). More worryingly, anthropologists' work may not just have failed to convince the wider population of the dangers of essentialism, but may also have exacerbated the perception that we are part of a larger vanguard of 'elites' that preach that identity categories and conditions of existence are 'constructed' to people for whom they were only ever experienced as given and unchangeable. This is dangerous in a time of right-wing populists and demagogues, whose deployments of essentialist claims can make them appear as if they are the only ones *in touch with ethnographic reality.*

Whether one buys such an argument or not, I suggest that there is certainly a need to consider whether the theoretically robust and political virtuous project of demolishing essentialist ideas will *automatically* produce desirable effects outside of the academy. The preceding accounts shed light on an axiomatic tension between the need to understand ethnic difference as constructed and instrumental, and widespread claims made by people to deep-rootedness. This is exactly the challenge with which I was struck in the opening of this article: with 'constructed' forms of ethnic identification justifying and generating very real forms of both conflict and solidarity. Rather than retreat from theoretically unfashionable claims made by interlocutors, it might be better to meet claims of rootedness head on and ask what they are deployed to *do*. To demonstrate the profound political implications of this theoretical tension, I now turn to ethnographic material from Khovd province.

Khovd province: an *Oirat* homeland?

During my time in Khovd province, and the administrative and urban centre, Khovd city (population around 30,000), it became clear that people saw themselves as markedly different from Mongols in other parts of Mongolia. People in Khovd would often view central – and, in particular, Ulaanbaatar – Mongols with scepticism. Part of this stemmed from an idea that non-western Mongols had 'forgotten their culture' during Manchurian and Soviet domination. Yet this difference is often thought of as a difference between *Oirat* and *Khalkha* Mongols. Many Mongolians in Khovd define themselves as *Oirat* Mongols, as wife-givers to the 'golden line of Chinggis Khaan', and therefore not direct descendants of Temujin, progenitor of the majority *Khalkha* Mongols (Bulag 1998). Moreover, from the time of Manchurian conquest, Khovd province, and its capital in particular, was a cosmopolitan place. Massive internal migrations following the fall of the Zünghars, the presence of Chinese occupying troops, the province's proximity with the Kazakh and Turkic peoples of modern-day Xinjiang, the presence of Russians during socialism and later, and its status as a 'place of exile for dissidents and resident aliens of Chinese and Inner Mongolian ancestry' (Atwood 2004: 311) meant that it was always considered a refuge for people who traced their origins to diverse places. In contemporary Khovd, there are a large number of Mongols who identify as particular subgroups of *Oirat* Mongols, with *Zakhchin, Torguud, Dörvöd, Uriankhai,* and *Olots* Mongols the most common. Many of these *yastan* are clustered around particular *sum* (districts) within Khovd, although all are found in reasonable numbers throughout the capital. Given the presence of *Khalkha* Mongols and a large number of Kazakhs, there is an unusually high intensity of different claims of ethnicity in Khovd city, only rivalled by the diversity associated with Ulaanbaatar.

It was clear early in fieldwork that in places like Khovd, any anthropologist would be faced with the dilemma posed by the intellectual responsibility to deconstruct forms of ethnic categorization claimed as essences by interlocutors. While one may not agree that directly contradicting one's interlocutors is axiomatically a problem, a brief consideration of the wider context of ethnic politics will suggest that at least in this case, the risks of such an analysis cannot be easily dismissed.

Amongst elite Mongolians in the capital, there is significant time and energy spent uncovering and (re)inventing the golden line of Chinggis Khaan. This codification of a neo-Chinggisid bloodline brings about questions regarding who has the capacities and resources to include themselves in this genealogy. My observations suggest this is primarily a *Khalkha* project, open only to those with wealth, political and social connections, and access to certain neo-shamanic practitioners in the capital. My instinct is to see this project not only as a furthering of the concentration of power and capital in the hands of a few families, but also an ethnicized project that excludes both *Oirat* and *Buryat* Mongols (cf. Bulag 1998). Yet these families are not alone in this endeavour and appear to have an unwitting ally in constructivist anthropological accounts of Mongolia. Simply put, the idea that *Oirat* ethnicities are constructed is deployed as evidence that 'true' Mongol traditions, cultures, and people are effectively *Khalkha.* That is, the definition of Mongolness becomes, by default, *Khalkha.*

Here, then, a focus on ethnicities being a Manchurian and Soviet construction serves to reinforce the dominance of those constructing the neo-Chinggisid line. If one denatures ethnic affiliation, the ideology of 'pure' Mongolness (which in my experience often means very little other than *Khalkha* hegemony) can be radicalized both to consolidate authority and to marginalize. Thus, I argue that a purely deconstructivist approach to *Oirat* ethnic groups in Khovd is not only intellectually partial, but also may have troubling unintended political effects, particularly the exacerbation of power imbalances. This is a specific instance of the more general danger I outlined above. Yet equally this *cannot* lead to the conclusion that an uncritical reification of ethnicity as simplistic essence is a theoretically or politically coherent conclusion. It is this circle that this article attempts to square.

My strategy for doing this involves writing with the kinds of historical claims made in the opening of this article. Michael Scott (2012) examines how mythic histories and their contestation play crucial roles in the formation of ideas of difference and 'ethnic tensions' in both the Solomon Islands and medieval Britain. Such histories exist as 'myth-dreams' that require individuals to 'crystallize [them] in ways that may mobilize a community around [them]' (Scott 2012: 121). The remainder of this article will be concerned with tracking the kinds of mythic historicizations made by people, not in terms of their relation to a known, historical past, but as mobilizations of exemplars in the present. In doing so, I aim to use the claims of my interlocutors of historical rootedness to examine how history, legends, and myths come to serve as exemplars and as moral horizons that have import in social life (Humphrey 1997).

Crucially, while recognizing the immutability of these claims of historical-ethnic allegiance for those Mongolians who make them, I show that as exemplars, this model of ethnic identification in no way prevents pluralism or their instrumental deployment. Ethnicities rooted in 'primordial' historicities *are* essentialist, yet, as sustained consideration of them reveals, the nature of exemplars means their *essence* is rather less reductive than one might think. This accords with important observations that exemplars, both analytical and ethnographic, may not only create stability but also contain 'a possibility for becoming something else, either by falling apart … or by being made to stand for other wholes' (Højer & Bandak 2015: 8). Mythic histories crack the world open for new ideas, as much as reduce it to old ones.

As demonstrated in the opening vignette, it is often historical figures who are discussed in characterizations of western Mongols versus the rest. These figures – in particular, Galdan Khan – were revered for their strength in defending the homeland.

Yet this homeland was simultaneously Mongolia (owing to Galdan Khan's exemplary resistance against the Chinese) and the western provinces (as seen through his invasion and decimation of seventeenth-century *Khalkha* Mongolia). This ability for Galdan Khan to act as a moral resource in a wide range of contexts is what makes him a powerful exemplar. Importantly, it is not simply that as a moral exemplar that Galdan Khan can be brought to bear on a wide range of moral discourses and contexts, but the very content of Galdan Khan as a moral exemplar changes based on circumstance. He can provide the moral grounds for schisms between Mongols and Chinese, and *Oirats* and *Khalkha*. Crucially, moralized claims and ascriptions of ethnicity take the form of references to historical figures and legends that are so *overfull* of content that they can justify claims that appear contradictory. I draw attention to the fact that ethnic categories, seen through the lens of exemplars, not only are 'discursive claims' (Sneath 2010) that are *contested* and have real political effects, but also are *essentialist*. I turn now to a number of accounts of mythic-historical 'exemplars' and the moral discourses of difference they generate.

Moral and material marginalities

The west of Mongolia is the primary population centre for Mongolian Kazakhs. Khovd, bordering the only Kazakh majority province of Bayan-Ölgii, has a relatively large proportion of Kazakhs compared to the rest of country, with Kazakhs constituting around 10 per cent of the province's population. The overwhelming majority of Khovd Kazakhs live in two *sum* (Khovd and Buyant) and in Khovd city itself. In Khovd city, the vast majority of Kazakh families live in the northwest of the town. The border between the 'Kazakh district' and the rest of the city is particularly pronounced as it lies outside the ruins of the walls of the Manchurian-era fortress. Today, these walls serve little function but to separate the Kazakhs from the Mongols, and, further east, to mark the edge of the town. The Kazakh district is relatively more impoverished than the rest of the town, and Mongols would often explain that they never go there, as it is considered too dangerous. Such statements reflect a more general hostility that many Mongols in Khovd feel towards Kazakhs. The reasons for this are complex, but a discussion of a number of instantiations of this hostility will hint at an answer.

During one of my first days in Khovd, I made an unplanned visit to the local police station with a few new Kazakh friends. To be clear, they were the party with the complaint, but owing to their slightly confrontational manner and (in the eyes of my Kazakh friends) the fact that the police were racist, we were all lucky to avoid a night in the cells. There, I encountered for the first time a poster of a police sketch of a 'Kazakh horse thief'. Horse theft, unsurprisingly, is a serious crime in Mongolia, and a concern in Mongols' minds that Kazakhs have a tendency for horse rustling goes back at least a century (Atwood 2004: 294). The figure of the Kazakh horse rustler is a pervasive exemplar that circulates amongst Mongols in Khovd and reproduces the notion of Kazakh 'criminality'. I saw similar police sketches for a number of crimes throughout the province, seemingly generated from the basic claim (by a Mongol) that the criminal 'looked Kazakh'. These crimes were generally related to theft, although I came across some accusations of violence. Regardless, this image of the Kazakh horse rustler is clearly a manifestation and generator of mistrust of Kazakhs from the Mongol point of view.

This mistrust occurs against the backdrop of the inevitable fact that there are many friendships between Mongols and Kazakhs, particularly amongst young men and women. Many people talk about how their Kazakh friends are good, despite Kazakhs in general being dangerous. This attitude is captured by a common trope I heard when asking about Kazakhs: 'The first two times you meet a Kazakh person they will host you, show you great warmth and kindness. The third time, they will kill you'. When I attempted to push people to give me more concrete examples of this ambiguous danger, I was often told a story, the variations of which were founded on a theme of a single mythic-historical exemplar.

Exemplar one

This story invariably takes place in the generalized, presocialist, possibly pre-Manchu past (*deer uyed*). A wealthy *Oirat* herder woke up to find that his herd of horses had gone missing overnight. Surprised that this had occurred without his dogs waking him, he visited the families in the region, and asked if they had seen or heard anything. Eventually, he found someone who claimed to have seen a group of Kazakhs leading his herd away, but who had been too afraid to confront them. The (formerly) wealthy herder decided to ride off with some allies to confront the Kazakhs. Ready for a fight, he was surprised to be welcomed warmly by the Kazakhs. He was invited into the yurt (gloss here for Kazakh *ger*) and given much food and alcohol by the patriarch of the group. Upon inquiring about his horses, he was told 'yes, yes, later', and all those present feasted together. The next morning, their smiling hosts told them to return in a few days, at which time they would undoubtedly have information about his horses' whereabouts. The herder did so and experienced the same hospitality. On this occasion, however, as the *Oirat* herder was about to leave to return home, he was beckoned to follow one of the Kazakh men. Leading him around a mountain, he was guided to a small herd of horses, a fraction of those stolen from him. He was told to take them, and informed that it might be wise not to return a third time. Upon his homecoming, he quarrelled with his kinsmen over whether to return and secure the rest of his herd. The argument resulted in him and half of his allies riding off to do just this. They were never heard from again, presumably killed by the Kazakh horse thieves.

The argument between the (now less) wealthy herder and his kinsmen is mirrored by the kind of disputes I tended to hear upon the telling of this story. As one might imagine, some people use it as evidence of the arrogance and criminality of Kazakhs, while others suggest the *Oirat* herder had been rather greedy and highlight that the Kazakh man who had offered a portion of his herd had given the herder the chance to recover some of his loss. Such exemplars are multivalent, and so produce divergent interpretations and moral evaluations. While Mongols disagree regarding the relative (im)morality of Kazakhs, people do tend to agree on a kind of essential difference that marks interactions with Kazakhs as dangerous. Thus, even those Kazakhs who appear as 'good people' have the potential to mutate into murderous horse thieves, so that mythic narrative is imaginatively actualized, reproducing a cleavage between Mongols and Kazakhs. Conversely, the horse thief may be rehabilitated as offering compassion across 'ethnic' divides. It is these mythic histories that form the 'essence' of Mongol ascriptions of the ethnic category of 'Kazakh'. Critically, owing to the multivalent content of said 'essence', this (ethnographic) act of essentialism *amplifies* moral, social, and political potentials, rather than *reducing* them. This demands recognition at a theoretical level and, importantly, this is true not just in terms of Mongol-Kazakh relations, but also in terms of relations between Mongol 'ethnic' groups.

School's out: (dis)unity, *yastan* and public institutions

Khovd *aimag* (province) is famous in Mongolia for its numerous ethnic groups, with between fifteen and twenty recognized *yastan*. This situation can be traced back to at least the period of Manchurian occupation, which saw extensive resettlement of *Oirat* and Turkic peoples after the conquest of the Dzungar Khanate in the middle of the eighteenth century. During my fieldwork, every person I asked could identify themselves in relation to a *yastan*. As the opening of this article testified, this ethnic diversity is celebrated in a superficial register. People in Khovd are proud that they have not forgotten their 'tribal' affiliations, which are seen as an index of a lack of cultural degeneration. Similarly, various tensions between Kazakhs and Mongols aside, these multiple *yastan* are said to live in relative peace, free from sectarian conflict. Other than simple statements that the people (implicitly excluding Kazakhs) live together in the same urban setting of Khovd city, a prime source of evidence provided for this harmony is the substantial number of 'mixed marriages'. Thus, in my initial conversations with people, Khovd *aimag* was presented as a harmonious melting pot of different groups of *Oirat* Mongols. It should be clear that many of these statements only approach reality in Khovd city itself, as many of the *sum* in the province are home to a single, or sometimes two, *yastan*. Furthermore there *are* times when differences between *yastan* become extremely important. Crucially, this occurs especially in times of conflict and therefore in contexts where moral accusations are deployed. These moral accusations draw upon a similar exemplary logic, stemming from stories, histories, and legends associated with particular places and *yastan*. It is this form of exemplary morality that structures understandings of difference, yet also facilitates the generation of conflict and disorder.

In terms of *Oirat* subgroups, schools and public institutions in general provide an interesting case study. As all those employed in and encountering such institutions are, at least legally, regarded as identical before the law, there is an assumption of sameness, which brings examples of difference into stark relief. I was present for the formal party of a prestigious secondary school in Khovd to celebrate the annual 'teachers' day'. It is a socialist-era innovation designed to recognize the achievements and contributions of teachers. The celebration often involves performances by students, sporting events involving students and teachers, and a party reserved for teachers, who share a large amount of food and drink. In the course of the celebration I attended, the director and various senior teachers gave short speeches, toasting the upcoming school year. Crucially, there was significant stress placed upon the fact that despite being – in their eyes – 'the best school in Khovd', the school had students and teachers from many villages and *yastan*. The relative success of the school was said to result partly from the capacity to negate this difference in students and teachers.

As the afternoon wore on, the celebration became more chaotic, and at one point I was greeted by the sight of several women screaming at one of the more senior teachers. There were accusations being hurled that 'people like you don't understand these things', and 'you only care about people from your homeland', along with statements prefixed by 'we *Zakhchin*' or 'we *Torguud*'. The argument eventually ended with the representatives from the unhappy group leaving and the rest of the teachers wandering off to a local karaoke bar, where they stayed until the early hours of the morning.

It was not until a few days later that I fully reconstructed the argument. That school year had seen a national reorganization of education, a programme that was left incomplete owing to distraction by the economic crisis and the results of a subsequent election. What had filtered through to Khovd, however, was that there would be a major reallocation of teachers between public schools in the town. For a variety of reasons, this provoked great concern. Not only do teachers at lower-standard schools often have less experience, but also a teacher's salary is partly based on grades, so a less successful school results in a lower pay packet. Furthermore, informal gifts, which are almost mandatory from parents to teachers, tend to be of a greater value in more successful schools, where gifting parents exercised their material and social resources to secure places for their children. At the party, the director of the school let slip information about several teachers who would be transferred. The director of the school, a *Zakhchin* woman, was accused of making these decisions based on ethnic divisions, with non-*Zakhchins* replaced by those from her homeland.

My careful follow-up investigations did suggest the possibility that appointments appeared to be associated with *Zakhchin*-ness. The perception that ethnic networks are drawn upon in situations like this is thus not totally unfounded. Indeed, this is a claim I heard repeated in Khovd regarding hiring and firing and various other contentious decisions made in public institutions. Often, these events were contextualized in relation to deep, historical perspectives on old ethnic affiliations. Crucially, these contentious decisions were also often justified with claims that people of a similar group simply work better together because they have a shared historical repertoire and hence a similar mentality. When pushed on what exactly this shared history was, people would answer in a remarkably similar way across ethnic lines: 'They know our legends'. This dynamic can be better explicated through a brief account of another mythic-historical narrative I was told by the director of the school.

Exemplar two

Zakhchin served as border guards during Manchurian occupation. The director of the school told me of an event that involved one such person, who was a high-up in the garrison that manned the walls that mark the Kazakh quarter of the town in modern-day Khovd. As such, he was able to influence the goods entering and leaving the town. This allowed him to enable the trading projects of his kin and other *Zakhchin*, which consequently led to their relative enrichment: as the director of the school said, they 'ate well'. Other, non-*Zakhchin* people who lived in Khovd became angry, especially to the degree to which they felt they were denied the same opportunities. They therefore took matters into their own hands and began to smuggle goods in and out of the city. However, owing to their indiscretion, the existing Manchurian powers eventually caught wind of this and viciously punished all those involved, and the town as a whole, including the *Zakhchin* inhabitants.

The director of the school framed this as evidence of the superior strategic capacities of 'her' people (*manaikhan*), as demonstrated both by the actions of her ancestors in this story and in the modern day, as her kin would know the legend and favour their own people accordingly. Yet when discussing this story with those on the other side of the dispute, they held that it was precisely proof of the self-serving nature of *Zakhchin* people and their refusal to co-operate that led to the crackdown. What is clear is that in times of conflict, ethnicity comes to the fore in disputes that challenge the idea of Mongol unity, partly because social and material favours do indeed appear to be flowing along ethnic lines in a space where there is an expectation of equality: that is, public institutions. Yet more than simply reflecting upon ethnicized bias and tensions, this conflict is in part generated by the multivalent nature of historical exemplars themselves, which can be deployed to support inconsistent interpretations. In this case, this effect arises between Mongol groups rather than in Mongol-Kazakh relations discussed earlier. Yet, once again, an act of 'essentialism', a resort to mythic history, does not so much limit moral interpretations as create space for their *multiplication*. So while each claim of difference may appeal to a sense of immutable characteristics, exemplars retain an internal instability that renders such essentialisms surprisingly *anti-essentialist*. The manner in which ethnicity is formed through the idiom of legends will be made clearer via a discussion of *yastan* in the domestic sphere.

Exemplary dissonance

As was discussed earlier, a major index by which people measure the 'harmonious diversity' in Khovd is the frequency of 'mixed marriages'. This is particularly true in Khovd city, as a large number of its inhabitants came to the town to find work or study at university when they were unmarried, which in turn increased the chance of a mixed marriage, given increased opportunity for young men and women to meet outside their birth district. Formally, as Mongolia traditionally has a patrilineal system of descent, children in Khovd are classified legally and in vernacular discourse according to the father's *yastan*. Yet an important, and understudied, vector of descent is the transmission of exemplary mythic histories along the paternal line. Throughout Khovd, and indeed across Mongolia, there is a wide array of legends, myths, and histories tied to certain places. These geographically bounded legends (*domog*) therefore become associated with particular *yastan* in Khovd province, given that certain *yastan* are associated with certain places. As discussed in the close of this article, these *domog* play a major role in moral accusations and the making of (moralized) ethnicity. In particular, I examine the tension between a more micro-scale manifestation of the wife-giver versus the wife-taker that plays out in relations between wives and their in-laws.

While the axiomatic claim that Mongolia is 'patrilocal' is one to be questioned and qualified, it is true that young brides are expected to live with, or at least near to, their husband's kin. Daughters-in-law may bring with them the influence of various ancestral and contemporary harmful entities, as well as the unpredictability of their blood relatives in relation to the 'wife-taker' kin group. This is often intensified even further in Khovd when the bride is from a different *yastan*. When this problematic potential is actualized in conflict, it is often through *domog* that disagreements are understood and moral accusations made. I have numerous vivid memories of men at various levels of fury and intoxication reprimanding one another for not knowing the legends of their *yastan*. It is important to note that these arguments rarely arise from a debate over oral history, instead erupting from everything from superficial bickering to frustration over creditor-debtor relationality. However, in the flow of argument, moral accusations and explanations do rest upon the ultimate explanation of 'not knowing the true legends'. Furthermore, when asked, people will explain that some of the tension between in-laws of a different *yastan* has its origin in a different repertoire of *domog* that partly forms moral personhood.

Crucially, being exemplary, a repertoire of *domog* allows these moral stories to be applied to a wide range of everyday social contexts and disagreements, such as in the exemplars discussed throughout, and between in-laws, as discussed at the start of this article. If one recalls the argument between Zorig and his brother-in-law, Davaa, the two screamed at each other that they did not know the *domog* of one another's *yastan*, hence their improper behaviour. Zorig is *Zakhchin,* whereas his wife and Davaa are *Dörvöd.* While they were making rapid references to *domog*, the context of which I did not know at the time, I was struck by a particularly confusing phrase that Davaa shouted at Zorig: 'So you are here to take our camel meat again!' Initially, thinking this referred to a mundane dispute between the two involving the possible unbalanced flow of meat products through kin networks, I later asked Zorig and his wife about what had happened. Zorig laughed, said that I didn't understand, and then explained that this referred to a *domog*, not an actual dispute. Through follow-up conversations with both Zorig and Davaa, I was told the following story.

Exemplar three

There was once a *Dörvöd* woman who married a *Zakhchin* man. Accordingly, she left her *nutag* (homeland) to live with her husband. While the marriage was initially a happy and productive one and resulted in many children, after a few years they encountered hard times. Most of their herd was lost due to a bad winter and they were unable to elicit much support as it also affected the husband's relatives in the area. The husband and wife therefore decided to make the journey to the wife's *nutag* and implore the assistance of her kin. The husband had never visited his wife's *nutag* and so was a little anxious, particularly as when he had met his affinal family, they had seemed somewhat hostile. Upon arriving at the affinal *nutag,* he was again struck by the coolness of his relatives-in-law, as well as their reluctance to help. After the first night, becoming desperate, he woke up early and decided to take the slightly unusual step of riding to one of the local *ovoo* and making an offering of milk and a small amount of remaining dried sheep meat he had bought as a gift for his wife's relatives. He hoped that in doing so, he might appease the local spirits and perhaps soothe the hostile relations with his in-laws. Going there alone, he made his offering and circled the *ovoo* three times, adding small pebbles to the pile, as is customary. In doing so, he noticed the remains of what was clearly camel meat. Camel meat has a slightly ambiguous status in Mongolia. It is eaten by many people, yet shamans, non-vegetarian lamas, diviners, and pregnant women are among the types of people who should not consume it. This is linked to a conception of camels as 'heaven's animals', meaning the meat is powerful, yet also dangerous to those who pursue non-secular careers or are at vulnerable stages in their lives.

For the *Zakhchin* man, the presence of camel meat was an aberration, and a dangerous one at that. While for some people this heavenly meat is perfect for offering to the spirits that reside in *ovoo,* for him it was something that was *never* done in his *nutag.* Thinking it had therefore been placed there with malicious intent, he took the decision to dispose of it. Unfortunately for the man, his actions were observed by a herder passing through the area, and most people in the area quickly became aware of what he had done. His in-laws were furious, thinking he had intentionally disrespected the local land master spirits, and refused to believe he had positive intentions. The next day, it began to snow, and did so for so long and with such intensity that it became a full-blown disaster. This caused havoc for the people living in the area and, unsurprisingly, the *Zakhchin* man was blamed for angering the spirits.

The narrative I have presented here is the combination of Zorig's and Davaa's telling. While it was a *Dörvöd domog*, so that Zorig had only encountered it through Davaa's deployment of it in this and previous moments of disagreement, he had become familiar with its content. Yet Davaa insisted that Zorig had not understood the lesson of the *domog* and therefore did not *know* it. For Davaa, the story represented the dangerous arrogance of *Zakhchin* people, given the climatic disaster that resulted from the unilateral decision by the husband from the story to remove the camel meat from the *ovoo*. Yet in Zorig's mind, it was more likely that the spirits were angered by the continual offering of camel meat, which the *Zakhchin* man had conscientiously chosen to remove, something the *Dörvöd* people had been too stubborn to consider. In the argument between Zorig and Davaa, it was retrospectively clear that such differences exemplified by the *domog* were understood to produce not only the moral divergences between the two men, which caused affinal strife, but also their evaluations of one another's interpretations of the *domog* itself. Davaa, responding to Zorig's suggestion that the man in the *domog* was performing a charitable intervention, saw this as reflecting *Zakhchin* arrogance, demonstrated both by the actions of the man in the story *and* by Zorig's more generous, knowing interpretation. Zorig, however, saw his brother-in-law's rendering of the story as characteristic of *Dörvöd* people's inward gaze and their tendency only to help one another. Such differences were a major source of and explanation for conflict between the two men, and even made marital life difficult, as Zorig's wife tended to see things from her brother's point of view. Crucially, the different ways the exemplar lends itself to evaluation not only facilitate divergences in interpretation, but also in turn generate moral evaluations of the interpretations themselves. The multivalent content of the exemplar makes this possible, in the sense that its ambiguity logically results in divergent interpretations. The act of essentializing a person to an ethnic category defined by multivalent mythic histories thus opens up space for contestation rather than shutting it down.

Conclusion

This article has examined ethnic relations: between Mongols and Kazakhs, between *Oirat* and *Khalkha* Mongols, and between different *yastan* in Khovd province. It has suggested that ethnic difference is primarily understood and discussed in a moral register of historical and legendary stories and *this is what ethnicity is* in Mongolia. They have salience in an array of social contexts and can and do generate conflict, dissonance, and equivocal moral claims. In families, 'mixed' or not, people are ambiguously morally fashioned by these stories, making them a powerful lens through which to understand sameness and difference between mothers and sons, blood relatives and affines, and *Oirat* and *Khalkha* Mongols. Yet it is not merely that historical data are being selectively mobilized by individuals in moments of reflection, debate, and conflict. Instead, I argue that the exemplary stories I have presented here are in themselves contradictory and multivalent. Rather than a monolithic corpus of moral precepts, they lend themselves to, and indeed generate, different moral evaluations *by their own nature*.

Heuristically situating mythic histories as the 'essence' of ethnicity allows one to address the theoretical and political blind spots created by a purely constructivist account of ethnicities in Mongolia and further afield. My intention through this argumentative shift is to open up a conversation regarding the possibility of reconciling the important de-essentializing move of recognizing 'collective identities in Mongolia as discursive claims' (Sneath 2010: 262), on the one hand, with the fact that these claims are often themselves claims of essential difference, on the other. This theoretical dilemma may have concrete and troubling political implications in Mongolia and elsewhere. I argue that this need not be a choice between whether to essentialize identity or not, but rather an invitation to explore the analytic consequences of writing *with* the claims of essentialism made by one's interlocutors. I demonstrate throughout this article that exemplars *in themselves* generate divergent interpretations through their multivalence. In effect, I have attempted to heuristically essentialize a particular form of historicity, mythic-historical exemplars, as *themselves* the core of ethnicity and then explore the social effects they have. Taking this viewpoint, one can see how constructive takes on ethnicity might bolster hegemonic status, as with *Khalkha* dominance, and how essentialist claims can not only produce solidarity but also in themselves undermine reductive ascriptions of identity. As such, the mere existence of ethnographic acts of essentialism is in no sense an inherent political evil and therefore they cannot be an *automatic* target for anthropological deconstruction.

Put another way, essentialism as an ethnographic fact cannot necessarily be equated with acts of violent reductionism. In Mongolia, claims and ascriptions of ethnic categories are simultaneously essentialist and yet also serve to *amplify* political possibilities and social effects, desirable or otherwise. This has implications further afield. My final provocation for anthropological and social theory is that I am not just drawing attention to an instance of Gayatri Spivak's (1988) famous 'strategic essentialism', whereby social collectives temporarily accept and deploy a shared identity as a political tactic for mobilization and recognition. More than this, essentialist categories in Mongolia, and perhaps elsewhere, retain an inherent instability as exemplars enabling them to become something else (Højer & Bandak 2015: 8), and they therefore afford diverse political and self-interested projects. As such, they are an inversion of Spivak's original formulation and appear to be *strategic in their essence.* Anthropology must remain a force for the denaturalization and critique of violent and reductive acts of political and theoretical essentialism. Yet it should also retain an ethnographic openness to what various forms of essentialism actually do in social life. To fail to do so not only limits our understanding, but also risks political consequences precisely the opposite of what we intend.

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Différences exemplaires : appartenance ethnique, histoires mythiques et essentialisme dans la province mongole de Khovd

Résumé

Proposant un compte-rendu ethnographique de ce qui est dit de la différence « ethnique » dans la province de Khovd, en Mongolie, cet article s'appuie sur les matériaux recueillis pour remettre en question les termes du débat concernant « l'essentialisme » dans la théorie sociale. Il rejoint les observations d'inspiration constructiviste des anthropologues qui attribuent l'existence de groupes dits « ethniques » en Mongolie à des assignations idéologiques, nées d'intérêts politiques passés et présents. Une certaine tension intellectuelle nait cependant de la propension de l'anthropologue à s'engager dans la tâche politiquement importante de désessentialiser les identités à propos de gens qui affirment que celles-ci sont leur *essence*. Sans accepter les groupes ethniques comme une réalité qui ne poserait pas problème, l'approche proposée ne se réduit pas à faire de ces idées une cible à déconstruire. Au lieu de cela, l'auteur fait le récit de périodes durant lesquelles une compréhension moralisée de la différence ethnique est mobilisée par le biais d'exemples historiques mythiques et examine leur impact sur la vie sociale. Il montre que certaines formes d'essentialisme autorisent des concessions qui amplifient les possibilités sociales et politiques au lieu d'exclure brutalement. L'article conclut en provoquant les anthropologues et sociologues à examiner précisément la nature et les affects en jeu dans des cas particuliers d'essentialisme, plutôt que de toujours les démolir par réflexe.

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