



The Cultural and Ethnic Identity of the Oirat Peoples

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Introduction

The Mongolians are commonly seen as a single homogenous ethnic group with a uniform language. Yet, language documents of other peoples prove that 800 years ago there were already several different Mongolian language groups, in particular the eastern and western Mongolian ones. This is important as it might serve as an argument when discussing the principal question of whether the Oirat group can be considered an independent and ethnically homogenous group, especially in view of the fact that it is a very small group today.

In the beginning of the 13th century, when Chingis Khan founded an empire under the name "Mongol", the land was settled by people with a pronounced clan and kinship system. Their political concept was an aristocratic and not a popular one, which defined the nation's existence solely in terms of its ruler.¹ Currently, there are 27 ethnic groups in Mongolia, of which the majority belongs to the Khalkh-Mongols, representing 81.5% of the population (Census 2000).²

History of the Oirats

The ethnonym "Oirat" is used to refer to several groups of Mongols who share similar languages and traditions and who nowadays live in the territories of the Altai Mountains of Western Mongolia, in East Turkistan, the Province of Qinghai, Northeastern Tibet, and in Kalmykia (Russian Federation). The first mention of the Oirat (Oyirad) tribe is made in "The Secret History of the Mongols" (§§ 142-144).³ Their chief, Quduqa Beki, joined in a military alliance and in the vanguard of Jamuqa fought against Temüjin, the future Chingis Khan. Finally, the Oirats had to withdraw to the river Shishgid, a dis-

tributary of the river Yenisei. In 1449, the chief of the Oirats, Esen Khan, had become so powerful that he was able to captivate the Chinese Ming Emperor. In the first half of the 17th century, Güüsh Khan conquered Kokonor (Khökh Nuur) and Tibet, where he was proclaimed king by the Fifth Dalai Lama.

In 1640, the Oirat Code, a legal code regulating behavior, punishments and honors, came into effect. This legal code, to which several additions and amendments were being made until 1822, had also been accredited by the East Mongolian nobility. Galdan Boshogt, Khan of the Oirats, who eventually also ruled the large area of the Zungar Empire, was not only the principal adversary of the East Mongolians but of the Manchu Emperor K'ang-hsi as well. When Galdan finally conquered Eastern Mongolia, the Khalkh princes yielded to the Manchu Emperor with the contract of Dooloon Nuur in 1691 in order to be able to hold their pastures against the Zungar Khanate with his support. The subsequent battles, which occurred during the insurrections against the Manchurian Empire, caused much bloodshed and led to an exodus from the regions around the Ili to Western Mongolia.⁴

During the Qing dynasty, Western Mongolia was therefore under the administration of the Manchu and thus cannot be considered an integral part of former Mongolia. Maps show that West Mongolia in conjunction with some other areas was named "Khovd Frontier Region" during the Qing dynasty,⁵ which clearly shows that this region was not considered as a part of "Mongolia" at that time. In the early 20th century, it is unthinkable that the sphere of influence of Bogd Khan has reached as far as Khovd; thus, it was *de facto* "semi-independent".⁶ For this reason, the regions in Western Mongolia were the last ones to be integrated into the Mongolian People's Republic.



The Chingisid Principle and the Oirat Khanate

Even researchers claim that the name Chingis Khan is connected to Mongols and the acquisition of their own national and cultural identity.⁷ Yet, his rule was too short, and the world empire fell apart too swiftly for a uniform Mongolian identity to develop and to have possibly lasted until today. The death of Chingis Khan in 1227 apparently led to a crisis in the collective self-conception of Mongolians. When wielding their supreme power over the large areas conquered in Asia and Europe, the Mongolian Khans distributed their "ethnic resources" over competing territorial units. Despite or possibly due to that weakness, what is known as the "Chingisid Principle", according to which only men descending from the Chingisid lineage could become a Khan, was upheld. This circumstance illustrates the significance of the myths of lineage, given that the creation of nations is based on competing myths and symbols. However, the symbolism of Chingis Khan was subject to subtle but substantial changes: the fact that "Galdan does not bother to attribute to himself political legitimacy by claiming connection to the line of the Chingisid in order to become the 'natural' emperor of the Mongols, suggests that the privileged exclusiveness of the symbol of the Golden Descent had become somewhat diluted."⁸ This fact likewise emphasizes the discrepancy between the associations outsiders ascribe to an ethnic group and the self-definition of ethnic groups, and it is relevant when it comes to the construction of identities.

In 1911, when Bogd Khan was elected ruler of "Autonomous Mongolia", he was not chosen because he descended from Chingis Khan, but on the basis of Buddhist religion, namely as the eighth reincarnation of the Zhavzandamba Khutagt, as well as due to his neutral position towards the Khans of the Khalkh-Mongols. This is even more striking as he was not even Mongolian but a native Tibetan. Neither the Khalkh Khanates nor the Zungar Khanate of the 17th century can be compared to a national state in the modern sense.

Ethnic and cultural identity

For a definition of an ethnic group, Smith (1986) can be cited who defines "'ethnie' as a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of shared culture, a link with a homeland, and a measure of solidarity, [...]"⁹ In Mongolia, however, the concept of an ethnic group is still largely connected to kinship and common origin. Ethnic differences are historically determined, and ethnic identity has always been supported by its own political authority.¹⁰ Yet, groups who were created as administrative units or political societies often tended to be culturally isolated. As a consequence, local cultural particularities emerged as well as resistance to merging with taxonomically equal groups.¹¹ The vision of ethnic origin is connected to giving a group of people the permission to establish barriers in language, customs, and art. The role of music as an expression of lineage is a classical topic which plays a major role when trying to explain the question of identity. In the music of Mongolia, the diversity of ethnic groups is clearly reflected.¹²

In this context the term "social identities", "which are built on cultural materials coming from the family, the community and the nation [...]",¹³ is significant. These identities are not predetermined, but are inherent in the specific individual or in the environment. In this context, particular importance has to be attributed to language. The attempt to use Khalkh-Mongolian as the sole language of instruction for all ethnic groups in Mongolia during the socialist rule had an effect on the traditions which created identity and symbols.¹⁴ When it comes to the Oirat people, this did not just only affect their language but also their writing (*fig. 1*), which had been in use until the first half of the 20th century.¹⁵

The changing characteristics of cultural and ethnic identities always have to be looked at in the context of the balance of political power. With reference to the Oirat group, not only the interaction between past and present times is of particular interest, but also the interaction between nomadic and sedentary cultures, which are profoundly different in terms of economy, sociology, and culture. The criticism of letting traditional Mongolian values and culture sink into oblivion often

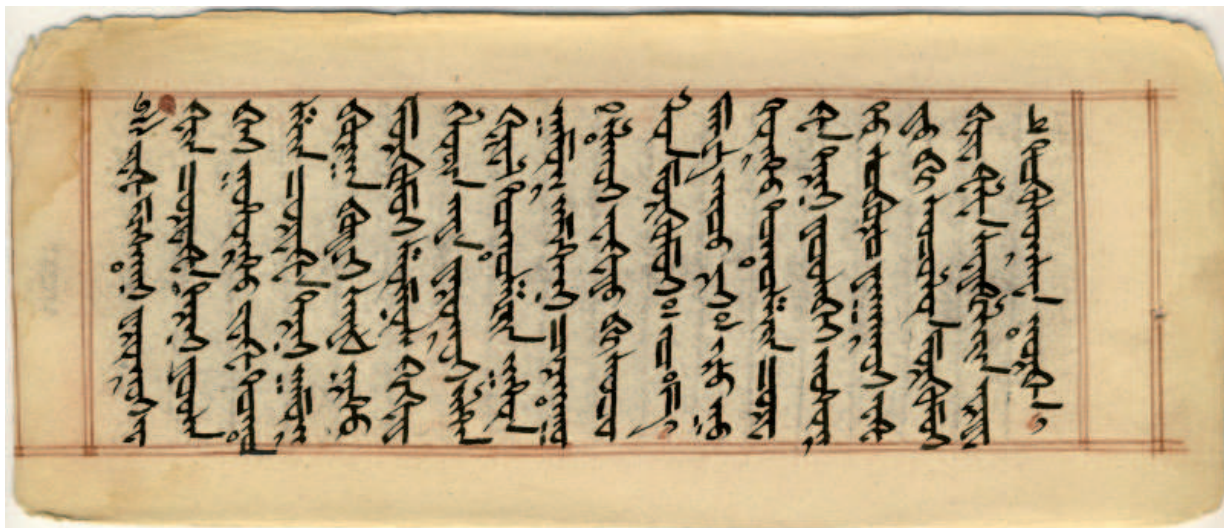


Fig. 1: A manuscript written in the Oirat „Clear Script“ (tod bichig), collection of the author

clashes with the criticism of a backward-oriented way of living. Some rural centers have actually consciously turned away from urban cultural traditions, with the aim of revitalizing local and regional cultural identities.¹⁶ The sense of belonging of an individual or a social group to a cultural community determines their cultural identity, which can be seen in small ethnic groups such as the Oirat groups, despite their lack of homogeneity. Among the elements which promote a sense of belonging the respective myths rank highly. Along with language, they do not only describe the cultural belonging, but also represent the collective cultural heritage of a community. The epic *Zhangar* serves as a prominent example of such myths. Having developed over a long period of time and having been passed on as a tradition in an archaic literary form with more than 30,000 lines, it was declared a cultural heritage.¹⁷ Traditionally, it is introduced with the *Altain magtaal*, a praise song to the native mountains of the Altai mountain range.

Apart from mythical heroes, the rise of the Oirat league and the Zungarian Empire as well as the late resistance to the Manchu sovereignty also spawned historical heroes (Galdan, Amarsanaa, and Chingünjav) who were praised in these songs. However, the cultural

belonging expressed itself not only in an immaterial but also in their material culture such as in their seals and brands (*tamay-a*),¹⁸ representing their own clan in their characteristic traditional clothing¹⁹ or in their symbols (*figs. 2-7*).²⁰

Oirat identity and the Mongolian People's Republic

The rule of the communist party from 1921 onwards meant a major change for a country with relatively old origins and without a clearly identifiable collective identity. The socialist state defined itself as a biological and cultural unit. What was highly significant was the creation of a new ethnicity which did not define itself according to commonly known criteria, but introduced new political terms and categories based on the Soviet "principle of unity" to substitute the old terms. While 23 ethnic groups or *yastans* could be counted in 1956, their number had been officially reduced to ten by 1969.²¹ The ethnic groups that were missing had been subgroups of the ethnic group of *Khalkh-Mongolians*. This was the start of an institutionalized way of determining the affiliation of peoples. What developed then was an overemphasis of a single ethnic



Fig. 2: The fiddler Colmon of the Oirat *Xoton* tribe plays the *Morin Khuur* (horse headed fiddle).



Fig. 3: The string instrument *Xuur* in two different variants: the Oirat *Ikil* (left) and the non-Oirat horse headed fiddle "*Morin Khuur*" (right). They differ in used materials, soundholes and in the arrangement of the strings.



Fig. 4: Four different *Tovshuur*: a typical plucked instrument of the Oirat tribes



Fig. 5: Ganzorig of the Oirat *Xoton* tribe dances a typical Oirat dance that is called *biy*.



Fig. 6: Baast of the Oirat *Zakhchin* tribe dances a typical Oirat dance that is called *biy*.



Fig. 7: Zhalx of the Oirat *Bayad* tribe dances a typical Oirat dance that is called *biy*.



Fig. 8: Monuments of Galdan Boshagt Khan (1644-1697) and Ayuush (1859-1939) in Khovd, Western Mongolia

group – authentic versus non-authentic "Mongols". At the same time, this led to a view of ethnic affiliation and belonging which was determined by ideology and ethnicity within the peoples. As for the ethnical and ideological view of an affiliation system of authentic Mongols, Uradyn Bulag described it by using the following sequence of logic: "Khalkh is Mongol, and Mongol is Khalkh, so if you are not Khalkh, you are not Mongol, and if you want to be Mongol, you must become Khalkh first."²²

In this case, the dominance and assimilation pressure of a policy could be clearly observed as it deliberately supported the majority culture as opposed to that of a minority, which leads to the discrimination against

minority cultures. All these elements were supposed to contribute to a Khalkh centrism.²³ For the Oiratic identity, these claims of supremacy meant a process of demarcation. Symbols of former traditions or independent ethnic identities were prohibited and, as far as possible, seized, destroyed, or at least manipulated. This can for instance be seen in the use of instruments and performance traditions which were modified and institutionalized.²⁴ A further example are the official historiography and school text books in the Mongolian People's Republic, where Oirat heroes were potentially problematic for the communist regime since the Oirats and the Khalkh-Mongols were historic rivals.



Fig. 9: In the year 2004 such maps have been distributed to the rural population of Mongolia to represent the planned administrative reform.

Монгол Улсын Засаг Захиргааны Зураг Төсөл [Administrative Map of Mongolia – Project plan] (The scanned map has been cropped and assembled). Editors: Монгол Улсын Засгийн Газрын Хэрэг Эрхлэх Газар [Administrative Office of the Mongolian Government], Монгол Улсын Барилга Хот Байгуулалтын Яам Mongol Ulsyn Barilga Khot Baiguulaltyn Yaam [Mongolian Ministry of Construction and Urban Development], Монгол Улсын Шинжлэх Ухааны Академи [The Mongolian Academy of Sciences].

Oirat identity and a Mongolian democratic state

With the breakdown of socialism in 1990, more than just a political system ended. Identities were re-discovered for which customs and tradition had been the basis. During the Mongolian independence movement (1990), the issue of popular nationalism arose, for which the concept of a common descent from Chingis Khan served as the basis for the Mongolian nationality.²⁵ In this example, it becomes evident how much history matters as a mythical construction when it comes to the representation of the past in connection with the creation of an identity in the present.²⁶ At that time the discussion about what Mongolian culture and tradition represent was highly politicized. After many years of denying problems regarding nationalities in Mongolia, the creation of a number of organiza-

tions could be witnessed whose aim was to revitalize their own culture. This development led to a change in ethnical identities.

This re-strengthening of the different identities in Mongolia, however, also led to a deterioration of the relationships among the different ethnic groups, as nationalism on all the different sides increased. Members of the Oirat Ööld tribe, for example, requested the dissolution of the old administrative structures and the creation of a common territory for all Ööld-Mongols.²⁷ While in large parts of Mongolia monuments and memorials have been erected in honor of Chingis Khan, and his name and portrait are being used for advertisement purposes, this is not the case in Western Mongolia, where pictorial representations of historic Oirat heroes such as Galdan Khan, Amarsanaa, and Chingünzhav or Ayuush (fig. 8) can be found, which were for the most part erected in the 1990s.



There were proposals, for example Marsh's proposal (2009),²⁸ to remodel the provinces (Aimags) in order for them to better reflect the subcultural or regional identities. A part of this initiative would be the creation of regional cultural centers. However, none of these proposals had been taken into account in the current draft proposal for an administrative reform and for the regionalization of the Mongolian Ministry of Construction and Urban Development. On the contrary, in this proposal new boundaries have been arbitrarily drawn without considering established administrative units (Khoshuud) of former times; nor has any attention been paid to the ethnic groups populating them. If the proposal was to be implemented, the current local district administrations (Sum) would become disempowered. The proposed four (fig. 9) instead of 21 provinces (Aimags) would be distributed, in terms of size, corresponding to the current economic regions. These super-provinces would bear the following names (from west to east): Altai Khan Aimag with Khovd as the center; Sain Noyon Khan Aimag with Kharkhorin as the center; Tusheet Khan Aimag with Darkhan as the center; and Secen Khan Aimag with Choibalsan as the center.²⁹ With the exception of the Altai Khan Aimag, all Aimags would bear the name of their Khans according to the historic administrative centers of the Khalkh-Mongols. It has to be added though that there has never been an Altai Khan or an Aimag of the same name. The original term for the Altai Khan that had been envisioned was actually Zasagt Khan Aimag, the name of the only missing Khalkh-Khan, who had never exercised any power over the Oirat regions; his region of influence was further east. When this plan was made public in Western Mongolia, it caused a lot of protest, and the name had to be changed accordingly. Neither the request for a name in correspondence to the historically developed administrative unit Khovd-Aimag nor to a historic personality such as Galdan Khan Aimag was complied with.

An example of the inefficiency is the current discussion on the transfer of the capital Ulaanbaatar to Kharkhorin. Economic difficulties, societal change, and major discrepancies between the urban and rural way of life under the influence of globalization have caused a change in human values, which has had an impact on the identities of the Oirat ethnic groups as well.

References

- 1 Veit 1982, p. 345.
- 2 Cf.: Ochir 2006, pp. 136-151.
- 3 Cf.: Taube 1989, p. 68f.
- 4 About 80 per cent of the Oirat population was massacred which numbered around 600,000. Cf. Bulag 1998, p. 91.
- 5 By contrast the Khalkh territories were integrated into the Qing Empire as "Outer Mongolia".
- 6 Anonymous, *Mongolia: Yesterday and Today*. Tientsin 1924, p. 12 cited in Kaplonski 1998, p. 38.
- 7 See as an example Otgonbayar 1996, p. 107.
- 8 Almaz Khan 1995, p. 258.
- 9 Smith uses the French term 'ethnie'. Smith 2000, p. 65.
- 10 Szykiewicz 1992, p. 198.
- 11 Szykiewicz 1992, p. 199.
- 12 See as examples: Chuluunbaatar (ed.) 2007; and *Collection Otgonbayar Chuluunbaatar 2000-2007*.
- 13 Cf.: Laitin 1998, p. 14.
- 14 The Mongolian script in Cyrillic letters is based on the Khalkh-Mongolian dialect and was introduced in 1941.
- 15 Chuluunbaatar 2008, p. 44.
- 16 Cf.: Marsh 2006, p. 290.
- 17 A Kalmyk version of the Zhanger contains more than 32,000 lines. – Cf. Dügersüren 2000.
- 18 Chuluunbaatar 2009a.
- 19 A mocking song of the Oirat *Torguud* tribe has as topic the boots of the *Khalkh-Mongols*. According to the text of the song, these boots cause blisters in contrast to the boots of the *Torguud*. – Cf. Farkas 1990, pp. 135-139.
- 20 Cf.: Амгалан 2000.
- 21 Bulag 1998, p. 33.
- 22 Bulag 2004, p. 2.
- 23 Specific to Khalkh-centrism, see: Kaplonski 2000, pp. 328-365; Bulag 1998.
- 24 Cf.: Chuluunbaatar 2009b.
- 25 Sneath 2007, p. 172.
- 26 Friedman 1992, p. 195.
- 27 Cf.: Finke 2004, p. 312.
- 28 Marsh 2009, p. 157.
- 29 The draft was approved by the Mongolian Parliament (*Ikh Khural*) on June, 25th 2004. – See also *Mongolian Urban Development and Housing Sector Strategy*, TA. No. 4352 – Mongolia, Final Report, Volume I, Prepared for Asian Development Bank, Ministry of Construction and Urban Development, 2005, p. 19, <<http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Consultant/Mon-UrbanDev-Housing/vol1.pdf>>.



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