# Chapter 13
# Constructing Socialist and Post-Socialist Identities in Mongolia[1]

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*Editor's introduction: As one of the most well-known and well-regarded Western scholars of Mongolia, Dr. Sneath in his presentation connects the ethnic and national construction of Mongolian peoples and group identities across the 20th century to the present. Stressing that terms of ethnic, local, kinship, and even national identification are flexibly defined and configured, Dr. Sneath charts how Mongolian organizational forms and group identities have been actively constructed – and changed – in the context of different social purposes and political regimes.*

*This is a longstanding historical process in Mongolia that continued dramatically with the construction of national and local group affiliation terms and identities during the Soviet-controlled socialist period. So, too, as Dr. Sneath shows, this process has continued during the post-socialist period to the present, including how politicians and others configure and mobilize various forms of identity and association appealing to and attempting to ally themselves with potential supporters in various constituencies in the country. Importantly, as he notes, this process has led to multiple overlapping networks and forms of group identity rather than stark polarization between some political or ethnic groups and others.*

*This process of flexible and flexibly-constructed Mongolian group identity, which ranges from the rural locale to the nation as a whole, is key to understanding the dynamism, the intrigue, the complexity and also the relative lack of social polarization between groups in Mongolia today. As such, Dr. Sneath's contribution is broad in scope, historically informed, theoretically astute, and of great practical contemporary significance.*

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[1] This draft paper contains extracts from the author's article "Political Mobilization and the Construction of Collective Identity in Mongolia," published in *Central Asian Survey* 2010, 29 (3): 251-269.

Official histories of the Soviet period tended to project contemporary national and ethnic categories onto the past, so as to tell the story of the Mongol or Khalkh 'peoples' through time (e.g. Gongor 1978). However, more recent scholarship has challenged these historical representations (see Atwood 1994, Bulag 1998, Kaplonski 1998, Munkh-Erdene 2006, Elverskog 2006).

In the 20th century, Mongolia became subject to the Soviet version of nationalist thought. As the state constructed a single national 'people' (*ündesten, ard tümen*) it also, following the Soviet model, constructed the past in terms of tradition (*ulamjlal*), and launched the ethnographic project of identifying and describing sub-national 'ethnic' groups or tribes (*aimag, yastan*). Since the collapse of Soviet-style state socialism and the introduction of multi-party parliamentary politics, notions of both tradition and collective identity have become potential resources, particularly for politicians, to mobilize public support. Concepts of 'local homeland' (*nutag*) are particularly significant, reflecting to some degree the importance of social networks.

As Laclau (2005: 154) notes, "the construction of the 'people' is the political act *par excellence*." Both nationalism and populism require this construction, although the "exaltation of this ambiguous 'people' can take a variety of forms" (Canovan 1981: 294). Nationalism and ethnicity have frequently been constructed reciprocally, and as Alonso (1994: 391) remarks, "ethnicity is partly an effect of the particularizing projects of state formation." In the early twentieth century, Soviet activists, in particular the Comintern, created a new vocabulary for "revolutionary" national and ethnic groups. One of the principle architects of the Mongolian nationalist lexicon was Tsyben Zhamtsarano, a Buryat nationalist and ethnographer trained at St. Petersburg University. A set of Mongol terms were chosen to translate the key elements of

Soviet theory on the historical stages of ethnic communities. The term *yastan* was taken as the equivalent of the Russian *narodnost* (ethnic group/nationality).

Like the tribe, the concept of ethnic group is rooted in the notion of kinship and common descent (Hobsbawm 1990, p. 63)— as Alonso (1994: 392) puts it, the "false precept… that ethnic groups are genetically pure breeding populations with distinct, homogeneous, and bounded cultures." Indeed, the *yastan* 'ethnic groups' were not autocthonous kinship communities, but politically defined categories that had been historically formed by rulers. The Zakhchin ('Borderers') of southern Khovd province, for example, was originally the name given to a Zünghar administrative division formed from a diverse set of subjects charged with the duty of acting as border wardens. After their lord surrendered to the Qing they were formed into a banner (*khoshuu*) and assigned duties to support the Manchu official at Khovd (Atwood 2004, p. 617). They remained administratively distinct and were labeled a *yastan* in the Soviet era.

Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, the newly elected president of Mongolia is of the Zakhchin 'ethnic group.' The electoral success of politicians from 'ethnic minorities' suggests that Mongolia's political discourse is not entirely dominated by the 'Khalkh-centrism' described by Bulag (1998:137), since sub-national ethnicity has not proved to be a barrier to high office in the Post-Soviet period. Politicians identified with 'minority' backgrounds have attracted plenty of 'Khalkh' voters, and there are, as yet, no political parties based on ethnicity or religious domination. But ethnic mobilization as a cultural project, rather than a party political one, is anything but a spent force. There are a number of movements that seek to mobilize *yastan* sub-national groups, and these may yet prove electorally significant.

Politically, the most salient sub-national form of collective identity is *locality* rather than ethnicity. Since territories are divided into nested series of named administrative districts, in most cases locality is conceived of in terms of units of government.  This need not be seen as a recent development; forms of regional political identity were centrally important in the past.  The importance of "roots" in local homelands is a central theme in Mongolian public life.  With the collapse of Soviet communism as a viable political ideology, nationalism became one of the central features of the new political culture. The state celebration of Mongol tradition almost appeared to fill the gap left by the implosion of Marxist-Leninism. In both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the 'homeland' was elevated to the point of becoming a sacred principle.  State sponsored culture celebrated the *saikhan ekh oron* or "beautiful mother-land" in literature, song, poetry, and art. The logic of people rooted in their native places also applied to parts of the nation-state, and the notion of the *nutag* "local homeland" plays an important role in the imagination of community. Politicians of all stripes have been keen to present themselves as having rural roots, with a strong sense of tradition.

Interestingly, since the collapse of state socialism, local homeland identities have given rise to a new institutional form. The 1990s saw the rapid growth of the *nutagyn zövlöl*, or "local homeland councils."  These organizations were established to operate as fundraising and lobby organizations, and also serve as central nodes for personal networks that link rural inhabitants to figures who assert some local attachment. Most of these councils were formed in the 1990s many of them at the time of the 60th or 70th anniversary of the foundation of the administrative district concerned.  Officially classified as non-government organizations (*töriin bus baiguullaga*), a *nutgiin zövlöl* sprang up to represent every *aimag* and some *soums* in the national capital.  Many other *soum* districts

that do not have such representation in Ulaanbaatar have established *nutgiin zövlöl* in the provincial *aima*g centres. These councils approach figures linked to the locality that have become successful in business, politics or some other sector, and ask them to join the *nutgiin zövlöl*.

We can see collective identities in Mongolia as discursive claims rather than a series of "social building blocks" that fit neatly inside each other, from household to region to nation. The terms used for collective identities are employed flexibly, referring to a wide range of categories of people, and these are applied to different contexts and modes of imagination – national, regional, ethnic, religious and so on. These are *context specific* groupings, dependent on a particular discourse or point of reference – be it as strangers in a capital city, activists in an environmental movement, or participants in national or local ceremony. We can see each of these as projects of mobilization, including the micro-mobilization projects of households concerned with common descent and stressing their local rural roots, using the idiom of descent or relatedness.

## Constructing a National People

National identity, as it is understood today, is a relatively recent development in Mongolia, although authors differ in their understanding of politically significant identities in the Qing and pre-Qing periods.[2]    Kaplonski (1998:35) argues,

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[2] There are different positions on the nature of the *ulus* (the term now used to mean nation or state) in various historical periods. Atwood (1994), Munkh-Erdene (2006), and Elverskog (2006) do argue for the existence of some sort of collective Mongol identity indicated by the term *monggol ulus* (and in Munkh-Erdene's case also by the term *obogtan)*.

"Although its origins can be traced to the end of the 19th century, national identity on a broader scale became important only with the establishment of the socialist regime in the 1920s …. It was, therefore … largely the socialist government itself that was responsible for creating and propagating an identity based on the concept of 'nation' in Mongolia."

In the Qing period (1691-1911), Mongolia was ruled by an aristocracy - the descendants of Chinggis Khan's lineage who held the title *taiji*. Mongolia was divided into approximately one hundred petty principalities termed *khoshuu*, conventionally translated as "banner" in English, each governed by a *taiji* who held the title of *zasag*, meaning "ruler." During that era it is difficult to identify a clear sense of Mongol ethnic identity distinct from the tracing of noble or elite ancestry (Munkh-Erdene 2006, Atwood 1994, Elverskog 2006).[3] Mongol commoners did not share common descent with the nobility, nor could they do so even in theory, since descent from royal ancestors was the basis of aristocratic status.

When in a later era Mongolian nationalists cast back through history for records of a common ethnic origin for all Mongols, they found accounts of ruling lineages. Historically, the "lineage of the Mongols," then, was primarily a reference to the aristocracy. As Atwood (2004:507) puts it, "[Chinggis Khan's] descendants, the *Taiji* class, were the only full members of the Mongolian community." But in the twentieth century this aristocratic political discourse was transformed by new ideologies. Mongolian independence movements began to construct a new discourse of popular nationalism in which

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[3] As Elverskog has shown (2006, p. 16-17), the overarching category of 'the Mongols' was not the primary political identity for those, such as the Khorchins, who later came to be described in those terms.

the shared descent of the Chinggisid lineage was used as the template for the concept of the Mongolian nationality.

The assumed reality of ethnic groups became a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy during the state socialist era; they were associated with the backwardness of the past. The values to be aspired to were the Soviet goals of fraternal socialism (*bratskii sotsialism*) and *proletarian internationalism* (proletarskii internatsionalizm). But such political orthodoxy formed only a part of a wider form of historical imagination that might be termed national populism. By this I do not mean any particular political ideology, such as that characterized by Germani (1978:116) as authoritarian movements based on class alliance between elites and a largely urban proletariat. Rather, I use the term more inclusively to indicate the intertwining of the nationalist and populist modes of imagination.

Following Kaplonski (1998:36), I use Liah Greenfeld's notion of national identity as deriving from "membership in a people" in which each member "partakes in its superior, elite quality" with a resulting perceived homogeneity so that "a stratified national population is perceived as essentially homogenous, and the lines of status and class as superficial" (Greenfeld 1992:7).

The imaginative project of Soviet-inspired nation-state construction required a Mongolian equivalent for the Russian concept of *narod* or "people." At first the term that was found was *ard* – a term that originally meant "commoner." But the pre-revolutionary political discourse had not constructed the polity with reference to a single general "people." Subjects had appeared in discrete categories. There were the nobility (*taijnar / yazguurtan*), the *Shar* (members of the Buddhist monastic establishments), and the *Khar* (secular commoners or *arad*). Political statements were constructed with respect to these categories rather than to a general and inclusive national people.

## The Construction of Ethnicity

Nationalism and ethnicity can be seen as reciprocally constructed. As Alonso (1994:391) notes, the anthropology of ethnicity suggests that "ethnicity is partly an effect of the particularizing projects of state formation." A set of Mongol terms were chosen to translate the key elements of Soviet theory on the historical stages of ethnic communities. The Russian narodnost (ethnic group/nationality) was translated as yastan.

Following the USSR, in which the state citizenry was made up of peoples of many ethnic groups or "nationalities," Mongols were registered as members of ethnic or national minority groups – yastan.[4] These became official identities and the internal passports of citizens of the MPR recorded their yastan. The vast majority were registered as Khalkha, making up 79% of the Mongolian population in the 1989 census. There were 25 other *yastan* ethnic categories identified, the largest of these, according to the 1989 census, being the Dörvöd (55,000), Bayad (39,000), Buryat (45,000), Dariganga (29,000), and Zakhchin (23,000), and Uriankhai (21,000).

Like the tribe, the concept of ethnic group is rooted in the notion of kinship and common descent (Hobsbawm 1990:63) as Alonso (1994:392) puts it, the "false precept … that ethnic groups are genetically pure breeding populations with distinct, homogeneous, and bounded cultures." Indeed, it is very clear that the *yastan* "ethnic groups" were not autocthonous kinship communities but politically defined categories that had been historically formed by rulers.

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[4] The census of Mongolia carried out in 2000 registered 23 notionally Mongol *yastan* (including the Khalkh) and four groups considered Turkic, the Kazakh, Urianghai, Uzbek and Tuvans (Dashbadrakh 2006:135). See Hirsch (1997:267) for the evolutionist scheme of *narodnost'* and *natsional'nost.'*

## Parliamentary Democracy and the Discourse of Corruption

After the "democratic revolution" of 1990, in which protests and a hunger strike by a new generation of political activists led to the resignation of the Soviet-style government and constitutional reform, Mongolia introduced a multi-party parliamentary system. Although the old Soviet-style ruling party, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) won more than 80% of the seats, it nevertheless chose to share power with the fledgling opposition parties, and introduced further political reforms, including a new 'non-Soviet' constitution in 1992 (Sanders 1992).

This placed Mongolia on a kind of middle road between parliamentary and presidential political systems (Munkh-Erdene 2010). The MPRP went on to win the 1992 elections but was defeated for the first time in 1996 by the Democratic Union coalition. The MPRP remained, however, the dominant political force in the country and swept back to power in a landslide victory in 2000.  The opposition parties did better in the 2004 elections, which led to a hung parliament and a coalition government, but the MPRP was returned to power in the 2008 parliamentary elections amid accusations of electoral fraud and, for the first time, violent riots leading to some loss of life and a national state of emergency.

From its outset, the Mongolian parliamentary system has tended to be 'consociational' (Lijphart 1999), that is, marked by a certain amount of inclusivity and power-sharing despite occasionally bitter political in-fighting. The victors have generally tried to avoid outright polarization of the political class, cutting their opponents in on some portion of the available positions. This meant that in the early years of the new system the political struggle was not a fight to the death for either camp, and bitter though the arguments were, the system had a chance to stabilize without major challenges to the system as a whole.

There have been some wide-ranging change-overs of top posts in the public sector as a result of a change in the ruling party of government, but there has also been a good deal of continuity. Similarly, there is a mixture of opinion represented by television channels and newspapers with different political stances spanning the spectrum of party politics.

As in much of the former Soviet world, there has been a rapid increase in perceived corruption (*avilgal*).[5]   It has become commonplace to think of bribery as an everyday part of Mongolian life – particularly among the relatively small new elite of wealthy businesspeople and politicians.  This is linked in the popular imagination with the post-Soviet era – the "age of the market" (*zah zeeliin üye*).  This discourse of everyday corruption should be distinguished, however, from the long-standing expectations and practices of gifting and mutual assistance within social networks, or *tanil tal*. These were well-established means of providing and receiving help and goods through family and friends in the state socialist period, and this was not generally seen as corrupt.

In the "age of the market" cash payments have become increasingly important and perceived corruption has mushroomed, but mutual help within social networks are still generally thought of in rather different terms than "corruption" among the rich and powerful (Sneath 2006, pp. 100-101).  This public perception reflects both the corruption

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[5] The term now commonly translated as "corruption" is relatively new - *avilgal*, derived from the root verb "*to take*" (*avah*) and closely related to *avilgalah* - to make illicit profit, extort money, or be covetous.  By the end of the 1990s it seemed that most Mongolians had to give some sort of inducement to get things done, and a government survey of 1,500 Mongolians showed that over 70% thought corruption had become widespread in the post-Soviet era, while only 7% thought it had been widespread during the state socialist period (see Sneath 2006: 89).

scandals that have continuously appeared in the press and the bitter experience of the privatisation of state assets, which appeared to generate fortunes for a few while the majority were left with next to nothing. Corruption in the wider sense has informed widespread notions of "moral decay" (*yös surtakhuuny yalzral*) since the collapse of state socialism. There is a pervasive suspicion of an elite who are said to be "eating money" *möngö idekh* - embezzling the public wealth.

As the July 2008 riots showed, a danger of power-sharing and consensus building is that the public may begin to worry that a self-interested elite is monopolizing both political and economic power. There is particular concern about the growth of mining operations, many of them foreign-owned, and seemingly the only type of economic enterprises that have flourished while other industries have suffered.

There is a fear that foreign companies are extracting the mineral wealth of the country, perhaps by buying off Mongolian politicians to do so. Public cynicism and discontent has been fed by the perception of a rather too-cozy accommodation between domestic and foreign big business, on the one hand, and, on the other, a political class meshed together by myriad private understandings and arrangements. However, despite a significant level of public disillusionment with the political class, electoral participation has remained reasonably good by western standards. Although the 2004 parliamentary election turn-out was just over 60% (Tuya 2005:.68), the 2008 parliamentary election and 2009 presidential elections enjoyed voter participation of 76% and 74% respectively.

The number of parliamentary seats assigned to different constituencies tends to slightly favour rural districts.[6] Politicians have tried to retain the loyalty of their constituencies, the

[6] See page 158 for Footnote 6.

majority of which are rural, by stressing both their local links and struggling to win resources for their own districts. The pork barrel aspect of politics has drawn the critical attention of the Mongolian press.

## Ethnic mobilization in the Post-Soviet Period

The 'ethnic groups' (*yastan*), although identified and constructed in the state socialist era, had generally been diminishing in importance as collective identities during the late Soviet period. But from the 1990s, ethnicity began to gain greater visibility, that is, as part of a process presented as the revival of traditional culture and a rediscovery of "roots" that had been covered over by Soviet modernism.

In a sense, collective identities of all types were being used in the search for mutual help networks in the social turmoil and economic precariousness of the post-socialist period. *Yastan* membership carries with it some sense of relatedness and common origin, but only for a certain proportion of people. Many Mongolians do not think of their 'ethnic' designation as particularly important, whereas most are very conscious of their locality identities.

To date there has been thankfully little by way of adversarial ethno-national mobilization. There are Kazakhs members of both the MPRP and opposition parties, and Kazakh MPs represent areas such as Bayan-Ölgii where many Kazakhs live, but these have not successfully formed a political

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[6] Most provinces (*aimags*) have about one parliamentary seat for between ten and twenty thousand voters, whereas in the city there are generally over twenty thousand voters per seat. In general the MPRP has retained stronger support in the rural districts than the city, reflecting its genuinely nation-wide party network of "cells" (*üür*), which other political parties have struggled to match.

bloc.  There are a number of Kazakh cultural organizations, often with links to Kazakhstan and other Islamic nations, but these are not as yet party political formations. But ethnic mobilization as a cultural project, rather than a party political one, is anything but a spent force.

## Conclusion

In the era of parliamentary politics, ceremony and public ritual continue to play an important role in projects to reconstruct tradition, assert collective identity and deploy concepts of belonging. Here we see particularly clearly the terms of collective identity used normatively.  They indicate sets of people who *ought* to feel some sort of commonality within a particular discourse – be it kinship, ethno-national history, or locality.

Although the concept of a national people has been deeply and powerfully installed in public culture, the mobilization of other forms of collective identity, and the claims by politicians and others to mutual loyalty and solidarity, largely remain as such – claims and projects.  They are by no means always successful. Some people are concerned with ethnic history and identity, but many others are not.  Indeed, beyond the immediate networks of family and friends, the collective identities that generally seem to have the most importance are largely those of locality – the *soum* and *aimag* administrative districts.

In all, we can see collective identities in Mongolia as discursive claims rather than a series of "social building blocks" that fit neatly inside each other from household to region to nation.  The terms used for collective identities are employed flexibly, referring to a wide range of categories of people, and they are applied to different contexts and modes of imagination – national, regional, ethnic, religious and so on.

The range of social groupings referred to in this way is often overlapping and incoherent. In each case these are *context specific* groupings, dependent on a particular discourse or point of reference – be it as strangers in a capital city, activists in an environmental movement, or participants in a national or local ceremony.

We can see the above patterns as current projects of mobilization ranging from national politics to the micro-mobilization projects of households. They are concerned with common descent, stress local rural roots, and use idioms of descent or relatedness.

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