3

Assemblage at the Household Chest

In the previous chapter I presented an outline of practices associated with harnessing fortune from livestock and mountain ceremonies. In this and the following chapter, I show that the concept of separating off pieces from one sphere and containing them in another in order to harness fortune can be transposed analogically to ideas about personhood, and specifically to the idea that the creation of the person is achieved through the separation of bodies. Thinking about personhood through the concept of fortune is not simply an analytical abstraction. People link the growth, health, and wealth of people directly to the successful accumulation of fortune. Because fortune is only ever visible *in relation to* some thing that takes a particular form, families and people are said to 'have fortune' (*hishigtei hüin, ail*) when their work and health are going well, and animals and food are plentiful. The process of relating to others also involves carefully attending to the separation and containment of people and things so that fortune may be harnessed for a particular household.

I will use the idea of a (separated) piece to explore practices that involve separating yet containing relations through attention to things that are either displayed on top of or contained inside the wooden chest (*avdar*, Bur. *hanza*) common to most households in Ashinga. An analysis of things at the household chest reveals that the 'person' is something that is constantly brought into being through one's interactions with various objects inside the home (cf. Carsten 2000a; Edwards and Strathern 2000; Strathern 1996; Bell 2001). While agnatic and inherited connections are visible in photographic montages displayed on top of chests, other kinds of relations that are the products of the separation and movement of people across time and space are hidden from view and carefully contained inside the chest (Chapter 4). These visible and hidden components of the household chest can be seen as inter-

dependent perspectives that point to different modes of personhood and forms of sociality. Together, they reveal 'a complex system of relations that "nest" one inside the other, like "Russian dolls"' (Burgin 1996: 86). I shall argue that the way in which these objects are displayed parallels the concealment or display of different kinds of relations enacted in practice.

It is important to stress that components of the chest do not simply objectify or represent various relations. Tending to the different components of the chest is also the means by which relations are created. In this sense, things in and around the household chest can be viewed as vessels that remain in place and act as the 'ideal kin group' or 'person' as people necessarily move away from the house. The household chest can be said to 'hold' together aspects of people that are dispersed, and allows for the continuation of certain relations that cannot be enacted in a shared place. The seasonal separation and assemblage of kin members at different encampments means that maintaining a connection with a person, place, or thing in their absence is essential. Because movement is an inherent aspect of the way in which herding households relate, I suggest that relations based on affinity, which involve the separation and incorporation of difference, are the necessary, yet invisible, background that supports the visibly foregrounded relations based on consanguinity, containment, and sameness. When viewed together, these components could be seen to provide an ensemble of the multiple ways of reckoning relations and conceiving of the person. They allow the viewer to apprehend him/herself as an exemplary person made from several parts. Far from being a mere psychological reaction to external stimuli, in this encounter, vision becomes the 'tool' through which these relations are created. In all cases, things at the household chest are viewed as pieces that have been separated in order to be contained, and are held to be a powerful essence or composite part of a person. Given this likeness, I use the term 'thing' to talk about actual artefacts as well as parts of people, such as pieces of umbilical cords and tufts of hair. It is suggested that the separation of people, or the ability to reflect on relations through the containment of some part, is essential for the creation of different networks of people attached to a single household.

People and objects

One might assume that experiences of historical displacement, movement to different seasonal places throughout the year, and marriage patterns predicated on female migration might make the anchoring of certain kinship

memories in specific locations necessarily contingent. Instead, I will suggest that certain artefacts and memories are retained and made portable as they are contained at the household chest inside the house. Here, houses come to appear as mobile exhibits, altering the display of different objects at different seasonal places. In this way, the absences and losses of different relationships are materially 'placed' and made present rather than being silently forgotten. Attending to the way in which such memories are contained and the way in which relations are maintained in spite of the absence of people, I also aim to go some way in dispelling certain myths of a timeless 'nomadic' society existing only in relation to its immediate environment and somehow outside history (see also Sneath 2006).

Drawing on Gell's (1998) idea that material objects act as indexes that abduct the agency of their producers, I suggest that things kept at the household chest come to stand for, and act as, instruments of social agency and relatedness. While these things do index certain relations, viewing or attending to them also initiates the possibility of new relations. These artefacts can thus be viewed as tools or instruments that index certain ideas that produce an effect, such as a motivation or interpretation, on behalf of the recipient who views or uses them. I should make it clear that while I do draw on Gell's (1998) wider point that objects have an effect (in this chapter, kinship is the effect), I do not use his extensive abduction thesis to explain how things appear to have agency. One of the reasons for this, as outlined in Chapter 2, is that the objects to which I refer do not always mediate the intentions of people. Some of the things discussed are held to have a kind of agency in themselves. In this sense, we may also side with a more Latourian analysis to focus on the networks of relations created between humans and non-humans (Latour 2005). Pieces of tail hair contained inside the house, for instance, do not only mediate the agency of the animals from which they have been separated. Their presence in the household is held to invite further fortune for the herds. Similarly, items such as clothes and children's cots, contained inside the house, do not simply index their owners. Containing these items is held to increase fortune, leading to prosperity for the household. In this wider sense, we may talk of these objects as 'actants' (Latour 2005). That is, they can be said to have a kind of effect when assembled in relation to a wider network of other objects. In so doing, the household chest comes to act as a site that accumulates fortune for the household.

While people claim that the containment of these things is held to harness fortune, at other times they may be viewed as distributed extensions of a relation or a part of a person (Munn 1992). This is not a mystical idea of the person. It is imperative for herding households that people are able to

manifest themselves, via things, in different spatio-temporal locations, beyond the confines of a single bodily form. In this way, we will see that people are not just where their bodies are, but in many different places simultaneously (Gell 1998: 21; Strathern 1994). It does not require any great leap of the imagination to find that people, animals, and things are sometimes perceived to be interchangeable. Objects, such as horsewhips, hats, belts, and stirrups, for example, often command respect similar to that shown to human beings. This is not because these things 'stand for' people, nor is it because they are seen as subjects in their own right. Rather, these objects, like humans, contain another dimension of the visible world, and something of the essence of the person is thought to adhere to their belongings. If certain objects can be viewed as extensions of their owners, then this is also something that renders them open to possible abduction. To wear something, for example, that has been used by someone else, could impart some part of that person on to the wearer.

Commenting on the inter-relationship between people and objects in Mongolia, Chabros (1987) states: 'analogies of form perceived between quite different and unconnected objects may result in the qualities of one object being attributed to the other' (Chabros 1987: 270). She further comments: 'It is difficult to consider the material culture of traditional Mongolia in isolation from non-material or spiritual aspects' (1987: 270). It is important to stress that pieces, which are contained when something has been separated, are not simply visual substitutes, icons, or proxies for absent people (Weiner 1985). Instead, relations come into existence through the creation of these things. In order for certain relations to continue, multiply, and grow, people, animals, or things have to be separated so that a necessary aspect of them can be contained and a liveable version of a relationship becomes possible. By exploring the kind of technology that reveals or conceals different relations, we will see that certain household objects do not just commemorate past relations, they also initiate current relations as the circulation of objects and people become intertwined in a larger process of maintaining different forms of sociality and personhood.

The house and its ties

As mentioned in Chapter 1, agnatic relations, based on the idea of 'shared bone', permeate much of Buriad life. Virilocal residence is frequent, and property, mostly in the form of animals, is traditionally distributed among sons. The youngest son of a family inherits the bulk of his father's livestock,

including the family hearth (*gal golomt*)—often epitomized in the inheritance of the winter pasture—that is held to represent the continuity of patrilineal descent. Nevertheless, throughout the year, wooden houses (*baishin*), as well as Mongolian felt tents (*ger*), move over the landscape. Parts of the wooden house, such as the door, the planks that make up the roof, and the glass window-panes, are physically removed and used to inhabit the shells of other houses at different seasonal locations. In transporting parts of the house in this way, pieces are severed from structures allowing people to inhabit new ones. In this sense, houses among pastoral herders should be viewed as mobile forms that travel along trajectories, rather than fixed buildings confined to particular locations.

It is not just the physical shell of a house that travels to different places. The people who inhabit a house also change seasonally (cf. Penn 2001). Throughout the year, people move from a house to different locations with different networks of people, in order to attend school, work, hunt, marry, or engage in seasonal work. While summer encampments gather together extended family members, winter encampments are often only inhabited by a few family members. During the autumn and spring, children attend school in district centres and younger family members may move away from the household to engage in temporary work, trade, or hunting. The point I wish to stress here is that although virilocal residence is common, and agnatic kinship appears to dominate many familial relations, throughout the year many different forms of sociality are enacted in different places as people move to different locations, activating other types of relations as they live with different people, while still being tied to their household.

In the countryside, both wooden houses and Mongolian felt tents are prevalent, and throughout the year people interchange kinds of residence. For example, a family may live in a wooden house at their summer pasture, but occupy a felt tent at their winter, spring, and autumn pastures. When fixed in a particular space, the house (be it a wooden house or a felt tent) becomes a static container for storing valued possessions, meeting with visitors, sleeping, and eating, and for times when one needs to sit for long periods to mend something or sew. From this perspective, the interior of the house appears in opposition to the movement that goes on outside it. As a one-roomed, open-plan space, there are no personal areas inside the house. Instead gender, hierarchy, and status define the interior. The area from the door (which faces south) to the fireplace, in the centre, is the area assigned for juniors or people of low status. The area at the back (to the north), behind the fireplace, is the honorific section reserved for elders and for people and objects that are held in high regard. The spatial layout of the house is further

divided by the male side of the house (to the west), from the left of the door towards the honorific section at the back, and the female side of the house which extends from the door, along the right-hand side (to the east), towards the rear of the house (Humphrey 1974b). While people do move about the interior, they sit, eat, and sleep in their correct places. This demarcation of interior space allows for the incorporation of different configurations of kin members, as well as outsiders, at any given moment. For example, an elderly female guest will know exactly where in the house to sit when she enters an unfamiliar house, or a young child will know where to turn for food and water.

In a similar way, kin terms also allow for the incorporation of outsiders. While most terms between kin are fixed and categorize people in terms of hierarchy and gender, some terms are both classificatory and ungendered.[1] For example, the term 'younger sibling' (*düü*), used for people younger than the speaker, does not specify gender or type of relation. In turn, the terms 'elder brother' (*ah*) and 'elder sister' (*egch*, Bur. *egsh*) are used for people older than the speaker, regardless of biological ties. Terms such these, which refer to a wider range of people than we might be familiar with, are not ambiguous. In addition to fixed kinship terms, people need these shifting and flexible terms in order to be able to incorporate people who visit their house and whom they sometimes want to treat as kin. In turn, people are able to establish sibling-like relations with others while away from their home through the use of such terms.

The seasonal movement of people, and the places they inhabit, creates the continual need to relocate both physical and relational boundaries. This can give rise to the feeling that there is no fixed place in which to situate people. For pastoral herders, however, this separation and incorporation of people and place is not unsettling or difficult. They harness the potentiality of this movement by ensuring that certain things remain contained inside the house as people and houses move location. These things act as sites (or stopping points) for containing aspects of people's relations in the absence of the people themselves. Hinging on an idea of belonging to a specific space within which residence is not fixed, Buriad ideas of the person depend on

[1] Specific kin terms draw attention to agnatic and non-agnatic kin by differentiating relatives on the father's side (*avga ah / egch*), or mother's side (*nagats ah / egch*). Male heads of two families, related through the marriage of their children, have classificatory terms (*hud*), as do female heads of two families related through the marriage of their children (*hudgui*). Grandparents distinguish their grandchildren as coming from either their daughter (*zee*), or son (*ach*, also meaning favour, grace, and benefit). See Vreeland ([1954] 1962), Pao (1964a, 1964b), and Park (1997) for information on Mongolian kinship terminology.

such spatio-temporal flux, as people may be separated for long periods throughout the year. Instead of people constituting a home, we may say that valued things inside the house remain in place and index the relations that are attached to it. In turn, the landscape surrounding the house is marked with stone cairns, sacred trees (Bur. *hairhan mod*), buried placentas (Bur. *toonto*), and tethering posts (Bur. *tsirig*) that create a sense of inhabited space in the absence of houses and people.[2]

Despite this seasonal relocation of physical and relational boundaries, since the 1990s herding households have had to register (*nerend oruulah*) the master of the family (the senior male head) as the 'custodian' of their winter pasture with the local administration. They can be said to have 'ownership' over access to this land (as well as, in some cases, autumn/spring pastures which are often one place). Access to winter pasture is often based on where one's parents herded during the co-operative (note that the co-operative was not formally established until 1958), and sometimes before this, when entitlement to seasonal pasture was passed through agnates according to customary law. Today, being the registered custodian of a winter pasture is highly valued because it allows exclusive access to meadows where in the late summer families gather hay, which is used to feed livestock throughout the winter. In contrast, summer pastures are not always fixed and families may gather in a different valley, depending on the availability of water resources and grazing conditions. Despite being registered as the 'custodians' of a particular pasture, people do not always live here. If a family goes to live in the district centre one year, they may ask a relative (or another family) to look after their animals and make use of this pasture, often in return for produce. This may go on for several years, but the winter pasture remains registered in the original person's name. It is considered a great loss to relinquish custody of one's winter pasture, in part because it often belonged to one's father, but also because of the value of the hay. That which is gathered in addition to one's subsistence is sometimes sold or exchanged with other herders. The fact that people and the animals they own may not always reside at the same place also raises issues to do with taxation. Once a year, herding households are taxed by the local administration depending on amount of livestock. A common way to avoid high taxes is to register livestock under different male family members' names. Thus, a father and his sons or brothers may register ownership over the different

[2] See Humphrey (1995: 135): 'The Mongols do not take over any terrain in the vicinity and transform it into something that is their own. Instead, they move within a space and environment where some kind of pastoral life is possible and "in-habit" it.'

animals, thereby splitting one group of animals up in order to avoid higher taxes. In reality, these men may not necessarily be viewed as 'separate' owners of the livestock. While one man and his household may look after the animals during the winter, for example, everyone helps during the summer and autumn and can access animal produce.

A parallel concern is that while people may be registered as the 'custodians' of a winter pasture, they may also maintain a house in the district centre. In the district centre, men are registered as household heads (*örhiin ezen*) with the local administration (even if they are unmarried and living with their widowed mothers). Here, the number of households is not always equivalent to the number of buildings. One building may include several registered households, so that a single wooden house, or several houses in one enclosure, may be registered under the names of different male-headed household units. This is the case, for example, if a married son and his wife live with his parents, or if married brothers live in different houses within one enclosure. The point to stress is that the number of household units attached to a single building/enclosure in the district centre, or herd of animals/pasture in the countryside, does not reflect the number of families that may actually be living in these places and tending to these animals at any given time. Not surprisingly perhaps, current forms of registration do not encompass the seasonal movement of people throughout the year and the economic strategies employed by people as they move between the district centre and the countryside or cities. Furthermore, the overarching emphasis on privileging male heads of households (even if they are younger than the female relatives they live with) means that it is difficult for widows and unmarried women to register themselves as the custodians of pastures and owners of houses. All this might seem overly detailed, but these examples provide a snapshot of the struggles that people face when registering households and custody over land, and it is what makes engagement with the local administration seem futile. The flipside, of course, is that while this kind of system fails to capture the range of practices employed by people, it can also provide leverage for making claims when ownership is disputed within families (see Chapter 8).

Before I focus on the way that people create attachments to particular households through the containment of various things, the genealogy of revealing or concealing relations in the house should be placed in historical perspective. During the socialist period in Mongolia (approximately 1924–90), Buddhist icons and shamanic implements were prohibited from being placed on view, but statues of Lenin and posters depicting, for example, strong industrious co-operative workers or joyful rosy-cheeked

pioneers were encouraged and openly displayed. In the 1930s, officials from the Internal Ministry, locally referred to as the 'green caps', raided household chests, confiscating valued possessions and burning genealogical records going back seven or eight generations through agnatic lines. Differences, especially of an ethnic or class kind, were thought of as politically polluting and people were forced to use their father's name as a surname instead of their clan name (cf. Humphrey 1974a), thereby limiting knowledge of a familial history to a single generation (see Chapter 1). When filling out applications of various kinds, people were often asked to submit a short 'biography' (*örgödöl*) declaring their father's and grandfather's names, occupations, and titles. Structuring genealogical knowledge in this way allowed the socialist government to categorize people according to new criteria based on class. Knowledge of this kind was valued strictly for political or ideological reasons defined by the socialist state. Casting genealogical knowledge in new ways was one method by which the state could ensure that the Buriad ceased to use their own means of constructing the past as a working part of their present identity (Weiner 1985: 210). Nevertheless, turning people away from genealogical networks, and the distinctions that these created, concealed the diverse ways in which people maintain relations and conceive of the person.

As a general introduction to ideas about personhood, along with luck-fortune (*hiimori*), breath (*am'*), soul (*süns*), and spirit (*süld*), a person's body is made from the coming together of 'bone' from the father (*yasan töröl*) and 'blood' from the mother (*tsusan töröl*). Some of these elements are given at birth, while others have to be made. Local procreation beliefs hold that infants have fragile bodies and unstable souls (*süns*). This is due to the fact that they have recently arrived from the spirit world and maintain the ability to communicate with spirits. Because of the uneasy condition of being both human and other-than-human, relationships between parents and their infants are often characterized as difficult. For example, parents resist outward displays of attachment to their infants so as not to tempt competition from spirits who might coerce the child to return to the world from which they have come (Chapter 4). Once guided away from these vulnerable relations, the shared substance of 'bone' from the father is emphasized. As shown in Chapter 1, agnatic relations based on 'shared bone' are increasingly being re-imagined in the present day, such as when establishing connections to the wider Buriad diaspora, and when establishing networks of help and support in the neo-liberal economy. But while agnatic connections may be the foundation for many kin relations, these relations co-exist with other ways of conceiving kin. Ideas of intra-kin rebirths (*ergej töröh, dahin töröh*), 'blood relations' (*ehiin töröl, tsusan töröl*) based on movement, links with one's birthplace and the deceased, as well as age sets also form lasting modes of relatedness. This multiplicity allows for people to be other things, while at the same time being defined by their bones and ethnic identity. A focus on things kept inside the household chest allows us to explore the ways in which agnatic kinship co-exists with, and is indeed dependent on, these other modes of relatedness. Much can be learned from the way in which these relations are brought into being through different things that are deliberately displayed or concealed from view. To paraphrase Strathern, these deliberate provocations to vision become a way for people to instantiate different networks of relations (Strathern 1994: 243).

The things on which I focus capture 'different aspects of the process of relatedness and the achievement of personhood' (Carsten 2000a: 29). They pivot around two distinct ways of reckoning relatedness. First, relations that are visible on the chest's surface, in the distribution and registration of family property, through communal ritual, and in formalized language are based on the idea of shared 'bone' from one's agnatic forefathers. Such relations exemplify a patriarchal ideology and the continuation of relations over generations. They are, however, dependent on a second mode of relatedness, involving the separation and incorporation of people. For such relations to exist, people have to move, establish links with other groups, and incorporate non-kin outsiders. These mobile relations are based on the idea of 'shared blood' from one's mother.[3] Blood relations are said to provide an 'umbilical relation or communication' (*hiiin holboo, tsusan holboo*) that is passed between a woman and her children, and between siblings. They are given anew each time a person is born and are drawn upon at different periods in a person's life as people are necessarily separated from each other in different locations. Such relations are not visible in particular sites. Rather, they are hidden in various artefacts, such as pieces of umbilical cords and human hair, that are kept concealed inside the household chest (Chapter 4).

[3] The Mongolian concept of 'blood' should not be reduced to Western essentialist concepts of this term (*à la* Gil-White 2001). For a start, the inheritance of blood does not refer to both parents. It is limited to the mother, and while given at birth, it is a form of relatedness that people strive to separate themselves from in life. Through the concept of fortune, this chapter proposes that although much Mongolian kinship is 'given at birth' through the inheritance of substance, Mongolian kinship is also made in practice through the management of various forces. While classical anthropological accounts (Vreeland 1954; Levi-Strauss 1969) and Mongols alike may hint, through the use of specific terms that refer to shared substance, at ideas that seem essentialist, in practice we see a multitude of ways of being related, so that relations based on consanguinity are also created, and change and shift throughout life (Carsten 2000a: 22).

I turn now to examine how these relations are created and maintained, through an analysis of things displayed at the household chest.

The household chest

In late summer 2001, I was alone with Delgermaa at the summer encampment for a couple of weeks. That summer the grass had been a lush emerald green and the calves had grown into strong cows. At times, up to eighteen family members had gathered at the encampment, creating a bustling and joyous atmosphere as we helped make curds, cream, and yogurt, and gathered berries on the edge of the forest. But the steppe that surrounded us was now turning a shade of pale yellow and we began to feel a chill in the evening air as we milked the cows. Other family members were in small glens deep in the forest at makeshift encampments collecting hay. During this period, before children leave for school and while people are collecting hay, women are left on their own at the summer encampment, transforming the last of the bountiful milk into less-perishable products for the winter. This is often a time of peaceful anticipation and an occasion for women to visit each other, catch up on gossip, and exchange news before they part to spend the rest of the year at different seasonal encampments and places.

One evening, after carrying the heavy pails of milk inside and letting the cows out of the corral, Delgermaa and I stretched out on the beds, a moment's rest before we began to separate the milk and prepare firewood for the stove. This evening, however, the routine took a different turn. As we lay there, the sunlight casting its last long orange beam through the open door, Delgermaa began to tell me more about her family and about her life as a young daughter-in-law. With other people absent, there was a sense of time standing still. We talked at our leisure as she told me about various family relations through attention to things kept inside the house. Delgermaa's stories, and the means by which she told them to me that evening, were a kind of turning point. Suddenly, the house was not simply a semi-permanent structure that sheltered us from the heat, wind, or rain. Instead, it came to life with things that were stored inside it and people in the family seemed to be very different people when viewed from this new perspective.

In the northern, rear part of the Buriad house, in the most honoured section (*hoimor*), opposite the door as one enters, there often stands a painted wooden chest. The chest may be covered in embroideries or painted with interlocking patterns and never-ending knots (*hee* or *ölzii*). Prior to the Cultural Revolution (*soyolyn huv'sgal*), and the introduction of co-operatives

in Mongolia, household chests were fairly small and often came in pairs. Pictures of lions decorated their fronts, facing in opposite and outward directions, as if standing on watch for the household. At this time, people moved more frequently with their livestock and the chest's smaller size allowed for ease of movement. With the introduction of co-operatives, nomadic movements became more regularized and households generally moved up to four times each year, while other people lived in settlements such as district centres. During this time, household chests became larger and the decorations began to vary. In Ashinga, most of the older chests had been destroyed during the political purges of the 1930s. The new chests have a decorative outer frame, which includes flowers and interlocking patterns, and an inner panel that portrays images of wild animals such as deer or stags, a fruit basket, flowers, or even, in one instance, an image of the Kremlin with Lenin's mausoleum in the foreground along with a couple and small child waving.

Delgermaa sometimes complained when it came to transporting her chest from one encampment to another. It was bulky and heavy and surely more suitable for life in the district centre where it could remain in one place for several years. But it was useful too; it was the only place where they could keep things locked away from the wandering hands of visitors. Traditionally, men make household chests as gifts for their daughters at marriage. They form part of her dowry (*inj*) which, along with a mirror, beds, cooking utensils, and some animals, she takes with her when she moves to her in-laws and sets up a household with her husband. On receiving such a chest, a woman may find that it contains sheets, blankets, coats, and a sewing machine that she will be able to use throughout her life.[4] Indeed, part of the marriage ceremony involves the bride's mother opening the chest and making her daughter's bed with the sheets contained inside. But, while the chest contains some items at marriage, it should be able to carry much more as women gather things in the chest for their families. The things that Delgermaa showed me that evening can all be found around or inside this large chest.

Visible prized possessions that indicate wealth and prestige are often deliberately displayed on the chest's surface. These include objects such as radios, clocks, batteries, lipsticks, and perfume. Such objects are given as gifts at marriage, during New Year celebrations, or when people visit from the city and neighbouring districts. Displaying these items on the chest's surface is to

[4] In general, people do not like to give a container of any sort that is empty. When returning a pail to someone who has given you milk or cream, for example, people take care that the pail contains something, even if just a small boiled sweet.

invite people to comment, touch, and look at them. Women and children often handle these objects when visiting a house and comment to their host on their smell, texture, or quality. Notwithstanding people's attraction to the aesthetic qualities of these items, they do not simply index wealth and prestige. During the socialist period, radios, commonly called the 'speaking chest' (*yar'dag hairtsag*), for instance, were a crucial means by which news and information could be received by herders located on the margins of state power. Cultural broadcasts were regularly aired, featuring poetry, songs, novels, and plays. In fact, the radio was often the herder's only companion while herding livestock on his own. Today, radios are a valued means of keeping up to date on national news, but reception can be difficult and batteries are often scarce.[5]

In the centre of the chest, behind these prized items, stands a large triptych mirror (*tol'*). Surrounding this mirror on either side, or attached to the wall above, are two large frames containing a montage of three-quarter-length, portrait-style photographs (*jaaztai zurag*) of kin members on both the mother's and father's side. This montage creates a pile, or layering, of different images over time, as old photographs are concealed behind new ones. Above the mirror, religious icons and images can be found that comprise a small shrine (*Burhan*) on which religious books (*sudar*), consecrated (*amilmulah*) images of animals (*seterlesen mal*), daily offerings of milk placed in small copper offering bowls (*Burhandaa idee tavih*), and the fortune vessel (or bag) are placed. Above this shrine, on the wall behind the chest, hang large painted portraits of deceased relatives (*jaaztai taliigaachiin hörög*), shrouded in ceremonial silk scarves (*hadag*).

These portraits occupy a high position, comparable to the sacred Buddhist images. They emphasize the dominance of agnatic ties and age seniority in the household and point to the continuing presence of the deceased among the living (Sneath 2000: 224). Portraits are usually painted between seven and forty-nine days after a person's death, and are sometimes drawn from a photograph. The person in the portrait appears front-on, peering down at viewers with a sombre expression (see Appendix A). When he was younger, Renchin drew such portraits for friends and relatives. The most important, but always the most difficult, thing to capture in these images, he explained, was the person's eyes. Next to these portraits, or above a threshold, such as a door or window, are drawings of any children, or other close relatives, who have died (see Appendix A). Deceased people are said to be made 'immortal and everlasting' (*mönhjüüleh*) in these portraits. As Rawson (2007) has noted in relation to classical Chinese portraits of emperors (the same may be said for Buddhist Thankga paintings too), these portraits are held to 'abduct' some agency from the sitter. Although people may be reborn in other people, the person's presence remains attached to the house after their death through such images. Indeed, these 'living pictures' may be treated as detached 'elements' or portions of people and are sometimes equated with their souls or spirits as offerings are made to them throughout the year (Wright 2004: 77). Around this fixed display hang vibrant and colourful embroideries (*hatgamal*), sewn by women, depicting their views on different family relations. Guns, used by men for hunting, are placed beside it.[6] Things kept inside the chest are never revealed to guests and are concealed from general view.

Young daughters-in-law and elderly female household members are in charge of maintaining this very visual display. They feed it daily with milk offerings, light candles and incense at the base of certain images, and attend to and change its form as they resurrect it in different seasonal places. In turn, visitors to a household are expected to respond to it. As one enters a house, after greeting the host, the formal way of entering involves going to the chest and, while bowing down towards it, knocking one's head (*mörgöh*) against its surface three times and turning a prayer wheel or offering some money or sweets to the religious icons, or to a portrait of the host's deceased relative.[7] In so doing, a visitor pays respect to their host by honouring the fact that they are a part of a wider network of people who respect their elders and the land masters of particular localities (the term 'land masters' refers to

[5] The radio allows for diverse and varied information to be united in a single site. Today, only a few can afford to subscribe to luxury items such as newspapers and magazines, and current newspaper editions are few and far between. Often, people will find some excuse to visit a household which they know has a recent newspaper. After exchanging some pleasantries, they may recline on one of the beds and read parts of it at their leisure. The same goes for any books. In the early post-socialist period, books were often used for cigarettes and toilet paper. Those that have survived as reading material are often passed between friends who may read them several times over. Like the radio, books and newspapers mediate connections between people.

[6] It is worth noting that women do not hunt and should not touch guns. Guns are an extension of male power, something equivalent to the Tibetan concept '*Dgra Bla*', sometimes conceived as the male 'seat' of the household (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993: 318–40). In the early stages of my fieldwork, when men at the encampment were trading illegal animal parts in the district centre, I often found guns hidden in the felt mattress of my bed. At this stage, my foreign status rendered my bed an ungendered hiding place for the guns.

[7] It is generally held that this area is sacred. Regardless of the presence of religious paintings or icons, people may place some money or other offering on its surface. The idea of knocking, in order to set some transformation in motion, is further elaborated in Chapter 4 when people roll on the ground where their placentas are buried.

the invisible spiritual 'owners', 'masters', or 'stewards' of the land, see Chapter 2). In addition, because the mirror is at the centre, when attending to or viewing this display a person may catch a glimpse of themselves at the centre of these different imaginings of kinship. The display allows the visitor to respect their host while at the same time imagine themselves as placed, albeit fleetingly, within this web of relations as a potential part of the network that they are honouring.

Figure 3.1 Household chest.

Photographic montages

In the following, I focus on two particular aspect of this display: photographic montages and embroideries that line the inside walls of the house. Some time between the 1950s and 1960s, when photographs became more widely available, herding households began to embrace the medium of photography for displaying images in the form of montages on the chest's surface. Having left behind their homeland in the 1900s, and losing so many of their relatives in the 1930s and 1940s to political persecution and war, for the Buriad this technology was of particular importance. With images of family members placed next to each other, the montage provided a new way for people to display a sense of temporal depth to their lives and a means by which they could begin to build a narrative of themselves as embedded in relations with others. Photographic montages also provide a flexible medium for displaying relations attached to a household. The montage element is not arbitrary. It allows for different kinds of people—school friends, grandparents, co-operative workers—to be brought together in a single site. Different images are also displayed at different seasonal places, allowing for change and adaptation according to different needs. In this sense, the photographic display depicts an alternative view of people's relations from the oral histories discussed in Chapter 1, and point, not so much to events and experiences, but to collectives and their networks. The success of the montage rests on its ability to display to others who one is, while at the same time providing a powerful medium by which to make those who are absent present (Drazin and Frohlich 2007: 58). I use the term 'montage' rather than 'collage' to describe the arrangement of separate photographs and images placed together in a single frame. This is not a jumbled collection of impressions, but a deliberate juxtaposition that is meant to trigger effects. The capacity of the montage to trigger an effect is two-fold. It publicly displays the shifting connections, alliances, and social networks available to the people of a household. For those who live under the gaze of the montage, however, the images trigger individual memories and remind one of obligations. In this sense, the montage may be viewed as a kind of *aide-mémoire*. The photographs can be said to provide a 'pseudo-presence' (Sontag [1971] 2002) of people in their absence. The effect of the montage can be said to rest on this tension, depending on who is viewing it. On the one hand, it is a site for the accumulation of memories. On the other hand, it is a shield that projects one's alliances to others.

Photographs displayed in frames above the household chest may be viewed as a modern take on Buriad genealogies. They mirror some of the

Figure 3.2 Photographic montage.

compositional forms used to represent relations in traditional Buriad genealogies. The photograph of a patrilineal elder is often placed, with that of his wife, in the centre or top half of the frame. They are surrounded by their siblings and children, whose images extend outwards towards the periphery. To illustrate this similarity, I focus on Delgermaa's eldest son's photographic montage. This montage was displayed in his house at the summer encampment in 2000 (for further examples see Appendix A).

At the centre of this montage we see a formal photograph of Delgermaa's son, proudly sporting a green Buriad coat and winter hunting hat, while his daughter is perched upright on his knee. His wife sits to his right in a sparkling blue coat, and to his left is a rather nervous-looking image of myself. On each side sit his brothers. Below, we see a photograph of his mother's relatives. To either side are photographs of his three brothers and his sister. To the left of the central image are photographs of his male cousins. A photograph of his brother, dressed in a formal military uniform with various friends while on military service, appears on the right, as does an image of his paternal uncle with his wife. Above the central image, to the left, is a photograph of his father and next to this is an image of his maternal grandfather. In the centre, we see his paternal grandparents, and to the

right of this, a photograph of his maternal grandmother and his father's relatives.

What is striking and quite unusual about this montage is that there appear to be no images of people who are not relatives through either the mother's or the father's side (apart from myself). Many of Renchin's relatives gather together at their summer pasture, including his two brothers with their families and his sister who is married into a family that lives close by. Together, these people form an extended group that help each other with everyday tasks and activities. The composition of the montage echoes these links. It also mirrors traditional Buriad genealogical diagrams in its layout as it represents a centric view of kin relations that expand outwards from a patrilineal founder.[8] Unlike anthropological kinship diagrams, traditional Buriad genealogical representations did not define age groups in hierarchy from the top to the bottom of the page, over generations (see Figure 1.6). Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Buriad genealogies in Russian Buryatia, for instance, depict kin relations in the form of a cluster of male descendants expanding outwards from a single founder in the middle or top half of the page (Humphrey 1979). Like genealogical diagrams, the montage constructs a 'portrait-chronicle' (Sontag [1971] 2002) of previous connections, and reminds one of kin members who are absent. In so doing, it departs from a single person's perspective and provides a 'memory-map' in which past and present relations are imagined to exist at once.

We may recall that traditional Buriad genealogies were systematically burnt by state officials during the early socialist period and replaced with a three-generation model that was used to identify class. Recently, however, an interest in recording genealogies has arisen among Buriad households partly due to the fact that in the year 2000, the Mongolian government introduced identity cards, whereby people had to record their clan name (*ovgiin ner*), as well as their father's name and their given name. As the need to source this information became pertinent, people asked their elderly relatives, who were skilled at recalling genealogical knowledge, or consulted old records at the government office for information. Through this we see that while written genealogies were destroyed, genealogical information continued to be recalled through oral means. Certain people pride themselves on being able to recount knowledge of a particular family's genealogy. They are often called

[8] Bouquet (2001: 110) makes a similar point in relation to photographic displays: 'photographic reproduction [is revealed] as a powerful means of establishing and cutting genealogical relationship[s]'. See also Bouquet (1996) for the limits of analysing kinship through anthropological kinship diagrams.

part of the wedding ceremony.
desire to marry a woman, has
ned her to her natal family,
ousehold and try to per-
heir son (*hadag tavih*).[9]
mation to the bride's
ide recounts infor-
-be, and details
ions. This oratory
nd the two sides argue
that the couple will make
onial silk scarf upon the bride-
pted decision that they can marry. A
he wedding (*ber buulgahad zohistoi ödör*,
into one's house) and all rejoice by feasting
learning about the groom's genealogy that the
e her natal home and on the condition that her father
re alliance (Humphrey [1998] 2001: 386–7).

establishing exogamy, interest in knowing one's genealogical
s also arisen due to an intense shamanic revival among the Buriad,
eby people have to identify their clan name in order that they may call
n ancestral origin spirits (*ongon*) through a shaman. Information regarding clan names and the distinctions they created was explicitly frowned upon during the socialist period, but shamanic ceremonies are an important arena through which people revive, reinvent, and source information about their ancestral pasts (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Shimamura 2004). Although shamanism continued in this area during the socialist period (see Chapter 7), when I first arrived in Ashinga in 1999 there were only a few active shamans in the district and the people who visited them were mostly Hudir Buriads, who live to the east of the Onon River and have a long history of famous shamans in their families (for information about the genealogy of shamans in this area, see Appendix B). The Hori Buriads, who are the dominant Buriad group in this area, spoke of the Hudir's association with shamanism as a form of contagion and were frightened of their latent shamanic power, which differed from their own Buddhist views. I was repeatedly told how

[9] Once a man is certain that a girl wants to marry him, he will bring her to his household and present her to his family. She will stay here for a week or so and a message will be sent to the girl's natal home that she has been taken for marriage. She then returns home and the formalities between the two male heads of the households commence.

women who married into these families often bore disabled children. Because these people were unable openly to honour their shamanic origins, they were being punished by their ancestors, causing a high degree of mental and physical illness.[10] Since 2003, however, there has been a huge interest in tracing one's relation to deceased shamanic ancestors (*ug barih*, lit. attending to one's origins), among all people in the district, and the number of people who have been initiated as shamans has increased dramatically.

Nevertheless it is not simply that photographs provide a visual manifestation of kin that makes them similar to genealogical diagrams. The place where the montage is displayed in the house is the exact location where, prior to the socialist period, felt or wooden *ongon*—the shamanic ancestral figures that simultaneously represent and are the vessels that contain the spirits of deceased ancestors—would stand guard over the household (Bawden 1985: 153). In the early twentieth century, *ongon* in this latter sense were made of cloth, ribbons, hair, beads, bits of wood, feathers, buttons, animal pelts, felt, etc., and they included small human figures cut out of tin or painted on to cloth (Humphrey 2007; see also Hamayon 1990; Humphrey with Onon 1996). Writing about the Buriads of Transbaikalia in Russian Buryatia, Bawden (1985) notes that with social and religious change new items were introduced in the house, finding their place in the traditional internal layout. He comments that, in the twentieth century,

> the altar with its Buddhist statues at the back of the tent has given place to a table with family and other photographs. In the early nineteenth century, the intrusion of lamaism into what had been a shamanist society initiated a similar process. In some tents, shamanist idols [that is, *ongon*] could be found hanging up alongside the lamaist altars. (Bawden 1985: 153)

Indeed, Bawden is keen to stress that the rear portion of the house has remained the most respected area, whether devoted to shamanist *ongon*, to Buddhist images, or indeed to photographic montages (Bawden 1985: 153).

Humphrey (2007) has noted that the word '*ongon*' refers to both the ancestral spirit itself and the material container or vessel that the spirit resides in (or can be called into). Keeping this idea in mind, the montage and the portraits that hang above it turn on a similar kind of simultaneity. Indeed, we could say that the montage appears to have more in common with the sacred *ongon* figures than with traditional genealogical records, which were never, as far as I know, displayed publicly. The montage as a whole may be said to

[10] This rationale was also complemented by a secondary explanation: because people were afraid to marry into these families, they had been isolated from normal marriage partners and had been forced to inter-marry.

act as a vessel, gathering people together and casting their uniform gaze on to those in the household. Indeed, during the socialist period, this area of the household was a place to display images of various exemplary figures, be these Buddhist gods or pictures of monks who are viewed as 'teachers' (*bagsh*) throughout one's life (Humphrey 1997: 35). From *ongon* figures, statues and paintings of Buddhist gods, monks' portraits, and busts of Lenin, to photographic montages, this has long been the place to display one's connection to absent or deceased, sacred or profane people and gods, with whom one establishes oneself as having an intimate connection. The point to stress here is that placing someone's picture in your montage is a way of confirming that they are an important part of your household. In turn, because the montage creates a site where multiple gazes are cast out, the people who live under this gaze are constantly reminded of their presence. Placing a person's image here is to choose to live in the presence of that person and expose your life to them. In this sense, the photographic montage is not simply a way of thinking about people who are absent (or as a record, such as a genealogy); it also signals the work involved in keeping up and maintaining certain relations with others and one's continued obligation to them.

How people are situated in relation to the montage, as daughter-in-law, son, or visitor, also has an impact on the way one sees it. When I was looking at this montage with Delgermaa, narratives about the various people in the images began to emerge and she was keen to locate these images in relation to previous conversations. Instead of viewing the montage as a collection of people, the presence of certain individuals was suddenly brought into sharp focus. In particular, Delgermaa was keen to show me her mother-in-law. Pointing to an image of a stern-looking woman in a large fur hat peering down at us from the montage, she reminded me of previous conversations we had had about her life as a daughter-in-law and commented, 'Look, there she is, that is her. The woman I told you about who made my life so difficult!' It is important to point out that people often exclude certain people from the montage because they are not deemed worthy of a place in it. Renchin's eldest daughter-in-law, for example, did not figure in Renchin's montage, even though more recent photographs of his children and grandchildren did. Her place in the household was vulnerable and uncertain as she often avoided help-ing with certain crucial tasks in an effort to establish her own household, away from her in-laws (and sometimes from her husband). In contrast, although Renchin had been adopted by his father's elder brother and did not feature in his birth family's genealogy, his image did appear in his birth parent's montage, along with that of his other siblings. Excluding or including people in the montage may

be viewed as a political act. The montage presents contesting narratives of the history of a household. These are mobile and fluctuating displays that change, according to where people want to locate themselves in a wider network of people and places. At the same time, while the montage makes the people in the images into objects that can be manipulated by the viewer, for the people who attend to the montage, the presence of these images in the house also makes objects of the people who live under their gaze.

Relations of obligation

Photographic montages may be viewed as a technology used to display links and connections between kin. On closer inspection, however, we see that what links people together in photographic displays differs from the agnatic links that join people together in traditional genealogical diagrams. In contrast to traditional Buriad genealogies, photographic montages of kin members reckon relations through both the mother's and father's side. When I studied the relations depicted in the photographs that were on display, I found that one of the frames commonly displayed the woman's relatives and friends, while the other frame displayed the man's relatives and friends (see Appendix A). Together, they presented a bilateral view of the people connected to a couple's household. They included photographs of school friends, people from one's summer pasture, work colleagues, a pair of brothers preparing to leave for hunting, or a family visit to a historic site, and groups of people at other special events, such as funerals. Studying the photographs, I found that the oldest images were from the 1950s. These were photographs taken of male relatives during military service or in the army. Other common images included school friends and work colleagues, taken from the 1980s onwards.[11]

Displaying images of school friends is common. The practice of photographing school leavers emerged during the socialist period. Friendships formed at school, during pioneer camps, and at training courses created important ties that lasted throughout life. Indeed, children from herding families are often away from their families for long periods. Fostered with relatives in the district centre or in cities, or placed at boarding facilities

[11] The Mongolian People's Revolutionary Civil Passport Statute of 1978 stated that by the age of sixteen years old all people should have a civil passport containing a 'photograph (without a hat) 50 × 60 mm taken at 16, [and later at] 25, and 45 years of age' (Dumburai 1982: 262). These photographs later came to be placed in frames at the household chest.

attached to the school, their education means that children are often separated from their birth parents for much of the year. It is usual for a photographer from the provincial capital to take photographs at the school graduation in June and, a few months later, a copy is given to each of the children. Graduation photographs are very stylized. They involve a class of children facing in the same direction as their teacher, who often appears at their side. During the socialist period these images were often arranged in the style of a composite print. The face of each pupil was isolated to create miniature portraits that included their name, year of graduation, and the name of the district and school they graduated from.

Figure 3.3 Composite print of school graduates.

It was also common to have group photographs taken of work colleagues, often standing outside the workplace with part of the building only just visible in the background, or of people who attended a course together. In contrast to such group photographs, closer friendships were documented during the socialist period through a studio photograph and quite often involved the use of props, such as jaunty sunglasses and t-shirts with fashionable prints, or backdrops depicting iconic cityscapes. People relate to classmates (*angiin naiz*) and work colleagues with a sense of

familiarity and almost kin-like obligation, even though they may meet very rarely. This familiarity also turns on its own tension as judgements of success or social standing are often measured against one's class- or workmates. A display of who was in one's class or who one worked with enables visitors to glean immediately which network of people one is connected to and who one can call on for potential favours.

Photographs in the montage point to a wide network of people attached to a single household. Writing about post-socialist Mongolia, Humphrey and Sneath (1999) have referred to these extended networks as based on 'social relations of obligation' (Humphrey and Sneath 1999: 141). These networks include kin relatives in a broad sense, as well as friends and acquaintances. They are of key importance for herding households as they 'link herding and urban families, and provide channels along which many goods and services flow' (Humphrey and Sneath 1999: 57). In ways quite different from those relations of obligation determined by the socialist state, Humphrey and Sneath point out that these networks are not based entirely on the exchange of goods and services; they are also characterized by the obligations that they entail (1999: 142). By obligations, they refer not exclusively to obligations of economic exchange, but also to moral obligations, characterized by emotion, affect, and respect. The importance of honouring and attending to relations based on such moral obligations should, I think, be emphasized. Pastoral households often tend to animals belonging to close friends or relatives for many years without demanding anything in return (see also Humphrey and Sneath 1999: 137). I often wondered why Renchin and Delgermaa accorded certain guests great respect and attention, only to find out later that the visitor had been the director of the co-operative, or the father of a great school friend, whereas another man, who always demanded vodka when visiting, was welcomed because they knew he could provide support during the autumn's hay collecting.

With such varied and different people included in the montage, the networks of relations depicted appear as an expansion, rather than a replication, of those found in traditional genealogical descriptions. Alongside relations based on the shared blood (affinal) and bone (consanguineal) from one's mother and father, other relations are also emphasized. Forms of relatedness based on comradeship, such as people one did military service with, school friends, and work colleagues, are all included. That I appear in Renchin and Delgermaa's montage, as well as that of their children, is a way of making my pseudo-presence a permanent feature of their household. At the same time, knowing that my image is displayed there, I also recognize the obligation I have to their household, even in my absence. Like the pieces of tail hair that

are kept back when people sell domestic livestock, photographs appear as pieces of people which are kept back when people are separated from each other (see also Chapter 5 on mirrors). Such pieces do not in themselves generate growth. Rather, by placing them in a matrix of other images, they confirm a web of connections and obligations in the absence of people. Seeing the display of these images visitors may also appreciate the different kinds of relations attached to a household. Photographic montages are both aids for recalling relations and an effective means by which people index their multiple connections. In this sense, the montage actively seeks recognition from others.

So far I have suggested that this display is a means by which herding households may record their connections to different groups of people and reveal these to others. In turn, photographic montages seem to replicate Buriad genealogical diagrams in their form, but extend their content to include other types of relations. They also allow the Buriad to present themselves as people who, despite having migrated in the early 1900s to this place and having their genealogical records burnt, tend to multiply connections and relations. In this sense we may say that they are 'not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement' (Sontag [1971] 2002: 165). Attending to the way in which Delgermaa talked to me about the montage, we see that these images appear as a place for recalling lost pasts and shattered socialist dreams, especially, maybe, for those in their forties and fifties. Like genealogies, montages are always 'interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and the social context of recall and commemoration' (Antze and Lambek 1996: vii).

The montage has a very different kind of effect depending on whether one is a visitor to a household or has connections and relations with those in the display. For a visitor, the montage appears as a statement about the kinds of connections people in that household want to emphasize to others. From this perspective, the montage is a tool that allows people to turn an ever-changing set of relations into a frozen object that others can, momentarily, observe. 'The montage is a proud display. It is like a public slideshow of your life,' my friend Enhtuyaa explained. Viewing the display in this way, visitors are able to infer their host's relation to other kin members, as well as friends and colleagues. Information such as ethnic background, class, and status can be 'read' by viewing the clothes people are wearing, and the type of events being celebrated. Nevertheless, the balance between showing too many images and showing too few is of the utmost importance. Those who only have a few images may be viewed by others as having access to few

links and resources. Those who show too many, in contrast, may be viewed as ostentatious. While most people do have large, and sometimes sprawling photographic montages, some families, I noticed, had none at all, and at certain times of the year, people chose not to display them.

When Renchin and Delgermaa needed funds to pay university fees for their two youngest children, Hongor and Baigal, they set up a small milk-collecting place (using a socialist term for this activity meaning 'section', '*tasag*') at their summer pasture. Local families whose summer encampments were located in the same valley as theirs, between the Tsegeen and Eg rivers, gave a portion of their milk to them in the mornings and in the evenings. Renchin's family would then process this milk into cream or dried curds which were transported to the city by a local driver and sold for a small profit.[12] When carrying out this activity, they concealed their photographic montages inside the household chest and only displayed the mirror, Buddhist books and sculptures, portraits, and small milk offerings, along with the 'fortune vessel' or bag (see Chapter 2). This act of revealing some things while concealing others was deliberate. During the summer, visitors frequently passed in and out of their house. Because of this, they chose to conceal the wider networks that were visible in their montage. Promoting yet further links with others at this time would have been to devalue those which were being utilized in the present and an ostentatious display of one's extensive connections. In contrast, at the winter encampment, when people were dispersed and far away from each other, and Renchin and Delgermaa were sometimes on their own for long periods, the montage was placed in a prominent position in the household. The people looking down at them from the display allowed them to feel part of a group of people for whom they were the centre. Taking this example into account we should think of the display at the household chest not as static, but as something that is altered according to where one is living.

In contrast, regardless of where he was living, Bat-Ochir never displayed photographs inside his house. In the northern part of his home was a chest with a very large mirror. Around this mirror hung gleaming medals, framed certificates, and awards that celebrated his vast herds and fast racehorses. When the sun came through the smoke hole and cast its light on the mirror, these objects were reflected and appeared to multiply, endlessly. Alongside these items and to one side, but still obviously visible, hung a

[12] While Delgermaa was in charge of storing and distributing money and all book-keeping, Bat-Ochir managed all the money in his family and kept it in a sturdy black bag, which he spent the evenings attending to.

bulging fortune bag. From the beams and attached to a rope was a thick bunch of long horse hairs which swayed gently in the wind and contained the fortune he had accumulated from their sale or exchange. By choosing not to display any photographs, it appeared that Bat-Ochir relied on no one to create his celebrated fortune. Along with the multiple tufts of tail hair from the horses that he had sold, there was only the official state recognition of his status as a wealthy individual. Concealing the means by which his family were able to achieve their fortune was one way in which he was able to separate himself from any networks of dependence or obligation. He was obliged to no one for his success, and no one it seemed was obliged to him. In this sense, we may reflect more generally that the montage places the owner in a relation of obligation to those who are displayed, while also binding those who appear in the montage to that household.

Being looked at

In Mongolia, the 'photographic event' (Pinney 2003a: 10) requires a particular kind of etiquette. At first, people take great care to prepare themselves in a presentable way. They then pose front-on for the camera and, rarely smiling, make sure to look directly into the camera with their eyes wide open. To the extent that 'good' photographs are considered to be those where people are facing front-on (and somehow symmetrical) for the camera, most of the photographs in the montage appear as reproductions of each other. The subjects appear as a collection of bodies all facing in a single direction. What makes an image 'good' to look at is also that the eyes of the person in the photograph are looking directly out towards the viewer. A common way to destroy a photograph is to scratch out the eyes of the person in the image, making the efficacy of the photograph redundant. What I considered to be images that captured something of the individual, engaged in a specific activity, were viewed as ugly (*muuhai*) and not worthy of display. Once the photograph has been taken, people disperse almost immediately and quickly change back into their ordinary clothes. Because very few people in the countryside actually own cameras (although this is changing), taking a picture is often something done when an outsider is present, be this an administrative official, a distant relative or friend, or someone who has acquired a camera for a special occasion. In turn, films have to be developed elsewhere and there is often great delay, sometimes up to several years, before the images travel back to the people who appear in the pictures.

With similar images placed together in the montage, instead of freezing

individual characteristics or gestures, we see a replicated pose of motionless groups of people looking at us. When looking at such a collection, the viewer's gaze is reciprocated with the people in the montage looking back at them. This reciprocated gaze is something that contributes to the efficacy of the montage. As the images in the montage transfix the beholder, they turn him or her into an object of their own gaze. In this sense, the viewer is simultaneously caught looking at the montage, while at the same time objectified by the gaze of the people in the photographs looking back at them. This view of several groups of people, looking out together from the display, is meant to dazzle the viewer with the multiple relations available to the people of that household. In this sense, the groups of people in photographic montages '*reach out* to the consideration of others' (Humphrey 2002a: 69, italics in original).[13] By drawing attention to the infinite networks available, the montage confuses the viewer as to who is and who is not kin.[14] Viewing the photographic montage in this way, people are not depicted as mobile individuals. Instead, people become replicable members of static groups, with potentially infinite links to other groups. For a visitor, the presence of the montage is something that one acknowledges, but never enquires about directly. Instead, as your eyes dart about trying to take in who the people are in the photographs, the viewer may be bewildered by the multiple relations available to the people of that household. Not unlike traditional Mongolian paintings (*Mongol zurag*), which depict multiple snapshots of daily life—close scrutiny of which may reveal the various stages of felt making, erecting a felt tent (*ger*), and religious rituals—depicted at different angles around the canvas, but with no absolute centre, so too does the montage invite the viewer to apprehend the individual relations attached to a house from any point in the display.[15]

It should be clear that the power of gathering together and displaying pieces of people in a single site is not only found in the photographic montage. We can draw a parallel here with points in the landscape, such as stone cairns (*ovoos*) where people make piles of offerings throughout the year and during communal ceremonies (see Chapter 2). The fortune vessel, or bag,

[13] Humphrey (2002a) has drawn attention to the two-fold way in which, when displayed by their owners, personal possessions reach out to the consideration of others: while they may be displayed to signal social status or vanity, they equally stand for the need for acknowledgement or recognition by other living people (Humphrey 2002a: 69).

[14] For a similar idea, see Gell's (1998) discussion of Trobriand prow-boards that dazzle exchange partners to surrender their valuables.

[15] This style of Mongolian painting is markedly different from Manchu scroll painting which forms an unfolding narrative in linear form.

also provides a point for gathering pieces from disparate spheres. Other objects, such as hunted animal skins, bear paws, and images of Buddhist deities, also hang from the beams of the house, or are attached to the wall beside of the photographic display. These objects have been sourced from visits to the surrounding forest or nearby cities. By accumulating such pieces, and displaying them at the household chest, people maintain connections with people and places other than those which they currently inhabit. For instance, Delgermaa returned from a visit to the city one spring with an image of the Buddhist god called 'White Tara' that she had sourced at a monastery and displayed it above the Buddhist books placed on top of the chest's mirror. In turn, animal skins such as sables, foxes, and bear paws, which her sons had sourced from their long hunting trips, were hung to the side of the photographic montage, near to the fortune bag and horse tackle. A man in Ashinga's district centre, who had trained as an engineer in Russia and was constantly asked to fix people's radios, pasted the inside walls of his wooden summer house with hundreds of magazine cut-outs of Socialist Eurasian beauties. The once glimmering images of women sporting large floppy hats and round sunglasses from the 1970s and '80s had begun to fade. Darkened, owing to the smoke from the stove inside the house, and sometimes torn, as a result of people leaning against them when they came to visit, they still retained a sense of exotic power and prestige. Those who had the money could afford to display posters depicting elaborate food platters and beach scenes (see also Chapter 8) or, at election time, adverts for different political parties. As at the *ovoo* described in Chapter 2, an eclectic array of different artefacts are gathered at the household chest to provide a gathering point or site that rests in a mobile landscape of different social relations. Certain things are contained and held here, while others are separated off and dispersed.

Private albums and embroideries

Later, Delgermaa showed me her own private photographic albums that were buried inside the chest. They contained worn, torn, faded, cut, and folded photos that had been placed in books and were wrapped in scarves and pieces of clothing to protect them from the damp and dust. In contrast to the images in the display, the images in her albums captured people in dynamic poses, often in smaller groups, or individuals engaged in some task, with various expressions and from different angles. While public display of emotion in the montage is restricted to a fixed way of presenting oneself, the albums showed fleeting and sometimes intimate interactions. These 'images

of movement' pointed to different kinds of intimate relations and chronicled individual friendships and experiences. Whenever I returned after a long period of absence, showing me these albums became a kind of ritual. By looking at them I was informed of private events that had occurred in my absence. Next to these albums, Delgermaa also kept notebooks from her school days, referred to as 'remembrance books' (*dursamj nom*). Such books were popular among school children during the socialist period. After graduating from eighth or tenth grade, a school child would note down a list of all the people who were in their class. Each of the children would then write a special note for the child, sometimes including a drawing, a cut-out image, or photograph. Delgermaa kept two such books from her eighth year graduation in 1972 and from her tenth year graduation in 1974.

As we looked through these albums and books, she told me about her school friends and work colleagues who had proved to be staunch friends to her throughout most of her life. Because she came from a small family with only an older sister and older brother, these relations were the first occasion when, as a child, she became a member of a single generation, rather than a sibling in a family hierarchy. Departing from the images, Delgermaa explained that her mother had given birth to thirteen children, seven of whom had died young, two others were adopted, one died later in life, and only three remained at home. Delgermaa was born three months prematurely (or, if we take into account the practice of counting the first year in the womb (*hii nas*), she was born at six months old). When she was born she was so small that she 'could fit into a winter hat. It was amazing that I survived,' she explained. 'I have never been to hospital in my life!' Because her chance of survival was so slight, her mother had almost given her to a passing trader. Fortunately, she kept her. Later, her parents joined the co-operative as herders and Delgermaa was fostered to an elderly couple in the district centre so that she could attend school. At eighteen years of age, she began to work in the district centre and soon afterwards married Renchin (see Appendix C for further details).

In highlighting this fragment of Delgermaa's biography I want to emphasize that, unlike the montage, images in private albums and messages in school books do not represent a collection of abstracted people gathered to create an effect. In her classic work on the way people relate to and view photographs, Sontag has noted that 'a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence' (Sontag [1971] 2002: 16). Delgermaa's narrative echoes this tension between presence and absence. On the one hand, the presence of certain people in Delgermaa's life is carefully maintained and cared for through the way in which she tends to and looks after her albums.

Figure 3.4 Remembrance book.

Aspects of these people, not readily visible in the photograph, were elaborated when we paused at their image. Their 'pseudo-presence' could be said to have triggered Delgermaa to recount aspects of them that brought their 'fuller presence' to life. Here, the difference between presence and absence became blurred, as absences gave rise to presences and presences also evoked different kinds of absences (Panayiotou 2006). The fact that these images were contained inside the chest, rather than displayed in the montage, also highlights Delgermaa's self-confessed nostalgia for the friendships she was able to foster during the socialist period when she worked at the sawmill, in the sewing section of the co-operative, and as a record-keeper visiting herding families with the co-operative director.

Lining the walls of Renchin's house were embroideries of different patterns and styles that brought a sense of dynamic colour and pattern to their home. Women tend to sew embroideries in the evenings, once other chores have been completed, and indulge in it as a creative endeavour. Women are praised for their sewing skills (*uran hatgamalchin*, lit. a skilled embroiderer), and those who do not sew (*höh züü höndlön bar'j üzeegüi*, lit. have never touched a blue needle) are considered not deft and organized enough to find the time to express themselves through embroidery.

Inspiration for embroidery patterns is often drawn from the world around them and there is a great variety of style and function. A single embroidery can take several months to complete while smaller pieces may take just a few days. One can find large wall hangings and smaller pieces, including runners that hang along beds with flowers and wild animals, duvet covers with swans and people, and triangular pieces with crocheted edges that can be laid over chests inside the house. Young women learn how to sew embroideries from their mothers or from their elder sisters and other daughters-in-law. Sewing together is a fairly quiet yet industrious activity and little verbal instruction is involved.

Thread is either bought from markets in the cities (the thread on sale in the district centre kiosks is considered too expensive to use for embroidery and is often only used to fix or mend pieces) or procured from friends who may exchange it for something like a set of buttons or other kinds of thread. Or more commonly, an old jumper or some other clothing is taken apart and the thread is carefully unravelled for crocheting, or the material used for the background base of the embroidery. Various kinds of stitching are used depending on the kind of thread and amount one has to work with. These include variants of buttonhole and straight stitches, couching and laid work, and crocheted edges that trace the outline of the material. Depending on the materials available, the whole surface may be covered in a design, or there may simply be a small embroidery in the centre of a large cotton sheet or a duvet cover. When talking about their embroideries women often recalled the period in their life in which they were made. Embroidery tends to be carried out in the evenings by candlelight, usually when a woman has a small child who needs to be watched while sleeping. Unlike the process of learning how to make a Mongolian coat (*deel*), which is an activity that can be done over two to three days for a particular person or event (cf. Empson 2003), embroideries are sewn at one's own volition, after daily chores have been completed. Women rarely sew embroideries at summer encampments. They are too busy at this time milking cattle and preparing dairy produce, such as yogurt, curds, cream, and butter, for the rest of the year. Autumn, winter, and spring encampments, however, are often less busy. Women do not always have to rise at 5 a.m., and they can spend a longer time in the afternoons sewing.

Although certain motifs are common, many embroidery designs are very individualistic and their images stand as permanent reminders of the spirit in which they were made. Like a drawing, this sentiment remains contained in the piece as family members grow and change and, in turn, people relate to the fixed images differently over time. When moving to new pastures, a

woman will choose which embroidery, and thus which sentiment, she wants to display in the house at that given moment. At certain periods in her life, images of wealth and status may be appropriate. At another time, she may wish to emphasize her ability to depict beautiful flowers with an even and intricate stitch. Some embroideries are given away as gifts or exchanged with friends, so that ties of friendship are knotted into the very image displayed. A daughter-in-law may also inherit her mother-in-law's embroideries. In this way sentiments expressed through embroideries are passed between women.[16] Indeed, Delgermaa gave me several embroideries to take back to England, which she hoped I would use to decorate my home.

We may think of women's embroideries as a counterpoint to male forms of oratory concerned with historical myths (see Chapter 7). They often capture stories about events in their lives and highlight certain kinds of morality. Two of Delgermaa's larger embroideries were sewn when she was a daughter-in-law and had recently given birth. The first consisted of a large wall hanging in orange, blue, and green and was displayed on the wall behind one of the beds. It depicted three deer, one sitting, one standing, and one walking in a mountain glen. She motioned towards it and explained: 'You see the deer on this wall hanging. I made this embroidery when I gave birth to my third son. Because I have three sons I made an image of three deer. I embroidered three things for the blessing of having three children.' It had been only a few days earlier that Delgermaa had explained to me that 'the best daughter-in-law is the one who has given birth to three sons, she is called the "sacred daughter-in-law" (*darhan ber*)'. As a way of publicly celebrating her own achievement at having given birth to three sons, Delgermaa chose to depict her children as three wild animals.

In displaying this image in the house, she also invited people to focus on her own achievement, having transformed from daughter-in-law to mother and the successful survival of her children from the vulnerable stage of infanthood. That she still hangs this embroidery in the house, even though her children have grown up, highlights her wish to continue to display to others this aspect of her biographical history. The second embroidery, again a large wall hanging, was of a rather common image of the 'four good animals' (*dörvön saihan am'tan*) in a variety of colours. This image was sewn

[16] Like the embroidered patterns on the heels of Buriad boots, which are very distinctive to this region of Mongolia, embroideries may travel between houses but are also intimately tied to their originator. Women identify distinguishing features of each other's embroideries. Buriad boots do so in a very particular way; the design on the heel is the personal 'signature' of the woman who made them.

Figure 3.5 Embroideries.

after she had her last child, a daughter. It was hung near to the door because it was believed to keep feuds outside the house. With four animals resting on top of each other, Delgermaa explained that the animal at the top, a bird, was her daughter who would one day fly away to another family.

Unlike Kazakh embroideries (Portisch 2007), or those produced by nationalities in parts of Siberia (Phillips 1943), these domestic embroideries were not made to represent particular ethnic and cultural traits during the socialist period. Instead, sewing was primarily valued as a form of labour. Young women learned how to use a sewing machine at school and many women went on to work at local sewing co-operatives. Sewing workers' clothing in groups was part of a modernizing project that promoted a new kind of socialist womanhood. During this time, embroidery remained a solitary and recreational activity that women undertook at home after work. Along with regularized sweeping of houses and yards, the use of cotton sheets on beds, and the construction of shelves for storing pots, embroidery could be viewed as part of a series of activities that created the appearance of a modern socialist home. In her work on shifting European notions of the feminine, Parker (1984) notes that while embroidery was seen to inculcate ideas about the feminine, it also provided ways to negotiate constraints on the feminine role. At different periods, women were able to question or resist received ideas about womanhood through the practice of embroidery. Parker refers to this as embroidery's 'secondary gains' (Parker 1984: 13). As a medium of expression, Buriad women's domestic embroideries are open to all kinds of interpretations, depicting as they do diverse images from Mickey Mouse, to mythical swans and personal histories. In spite of or maybe because of this, embroideries allow for alternative forms of expression, such as those described by Parker (1984). By this I do not mean that embroideries are a form of resistance. Rather, they provide an alternative medium through which women can draw attention to their biographical histories while in their marital homes. Indeed, Buchli (1999) has argued that in the context of house-communes in Soviet cities in Russia, the individual could exercise control over the environment through embroidery. Embroidery was a way in which domestic space could be appropriated, made individual, and interiorized (cf. Buchli 1999: 92).

For Delgermaa, embroideries were a way for her to appropriate the interior of the house and draw attention to the quality of her sewing and the innovative materials used. When her children were young, her embroidery could be viewed as an attempt to take control over the household, in spite of her husband's frequent drinking spells and her mother-in-law's persistent attempts to ostracize her from the family. Women often comment on the

quality of each other's work in terms of the evenness of the stitch, the size of the piece, and the kinds of threads used. Visitors may handle the piece, turning it over to see how it was made, and comment on the colour and quality of the materials. This kind of judgement also lays one open to criticism and it is a major reason why some women choose not to sew embroideries. Tsendmaa, for example, claimed that while she was happy to display her mother-in-law's embroideries, she was not keen on sewing them herself. 'I am lazy,' she exclaimed. 'I don't think I have the patience to do them and people judge you through them.' Here, it is not so much the capacity of embroideries to express aspects of one's personal history that is valued. Rather, it is the means by which embroidery exposes the skills of the maker that is at stake.

Notwithstanding this attention to the skill of the embroiderer, by looking at Delgermaa's wall hangings we see that embroideries may also draw attention to carefully selected sentiments that a woman wishes to emphasize to others. It could be argued that since the 1930s, when many women were left to bring up their children on their own and people were discouraged from expressing distinctive familial memories, women focused on alternative media in which to recall their histories for their children. Embroideries also provide a way for women outwardly to display their continued connection to their children, even though their sons belong to their husbands' kin groups and daughters are said to belong to another family (see Chapter 4). Indeed, embroideries appear to offer a parallel commentary on those relations that are displayed in photographic displays. Instead of drawing attention to groups of people and the multiplicity of relations in montages, embroideries encourage reflection on intimate family relations. Through their display, women spatially appropriate the household with images that celebrate their own achievements and draw attention to their views and ideas as well as their skills.

Like the household chest, embroideries also frequently feature interlocking patterns that frame the individual embroidery. These designs are held to be powerful in that they act as trestles that capture and contain fortune for the household. Togtoh, the fabulously outspoken and fearless kindergarten cook with whom I used to sit on the steps of the kindergarten watching the world go by, explained, while gesturing outward:

> In these houses you can see certain patterns and decorations on embroideries and in wood-carvings. When looking at such a pattern we think of the design as representing a long life. A harmonious continuum that is never interrupted by hell (*tam*) so that one is born again and again. Something one wishes for oneself and one's family.

Such designs adorn embroideries that decorate beds, windows, or the door in households. These places are significant in that invisible aspects of the person are thought to depart through doorways, windows, and around the bed. The patterns are held to 'catch' and entwine these aspects of the person in their designs. Indeed, Chabros (1987) has noted that decorations placed around thresholds in Mongolia are held to trap good fortune and distribute it in households so that 'decorative symbols have not just significance, but also power' (1987: 273).

Throughout this chapter, I have used the term 'network' rather loosely to talk of the obligations and entitlements that extend between people. In focusing on the household chest, however, the term can also be used with a 'new inflection' (Bell 2001: 387) to refer to the collection of material and immaterial, human and non-human relations who come together to form this site. In suggesting this, I follow several anthropologists and theorists that draw on Latour's focus on tracing connections between people and things in different domains (Carsten 2000a; Edwards and Strathern 2000; Strathern 1996; Bell 2001). Edwards and Strathern (2000: 162), for example, point out that '[n]etworks are not just relations between persons'. While previous network theorists traced ties between persons, particularly in structural-functionalist studies of kinship, they highlight that 'the instruments by which people reckon connections with one another create *mediators of diverse kinds*' (Edwards and Strathern 2000: 163, italics added). Following Latour, the term 'mediator' refers to something that transforms, translates, distorts, or modifies the meaning or elements it is supposed to carry, rather than simply reproducing or replicating them (Latour 2005: 39). Mediators may be substances, such as blood and bone, or they may be objects, such as ancestral portraits, photographs, and embroideries. Bell (2001) also uses this wider sense of the term 'network' to show the effects produced from alliances between human and non-human entities.

These diverse 'mediators' that form 'alliances' include different kinds of objects that, in Latour's (2005) terminology, may be called 'actants'. Latour (2005) uses this term to describe the connected and related agencies of persons and things. The tracing of any technical or social innovation, he suggests, will uncover a complex network of relationships between human and non-human forms. Unlike earlier symbolic approaches, whereby things are viewed as the passive recipients of the meanings people ascribe to them, or the Gellian (1998) idea that objects mediate agency via persons, this perspective stresses the extent to which things come to 'act' on others when placed in a wider network or assemblage. Action or meaning, in the sense in which I am using the term, is not something that people do to, or inscribe

on, things. Rather it emerges in associations and combinations between people and various non-human forms. Merging the boundaries between objects and people, Mitchell (2005) has drawn attention to the variety of animation, vitality, agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, and other symptoms that Euro-Americans attribute to images, objects, and things. He shows how persons may derive their features from engagement with various objects, as much as objects derive their features from persons (Mitchell 2005). This is not to view objects and people as equal cohabitants, but to suggest that an intentional subject acts and is acted upon within different networks of power that include the material forms that surround them (Thrift 2008: 111–14).

Among the objects on which I have focused, religious books, photographs, and portraits are placed in honorific places inside the home and given 'food' in the form of offerings. This is not because they stand for or mediate relations between people, but because they are held actually to have some agency that is either of its own order or some part of a person. Many of the objects that I have described exist in a kind of middling-space. People ascribe these objects individual memories tied to personal life histories. At the same time, some of the objects are held to act on people—for example, photographic images cast their gaze on to the visitor of a household. In turn, knowing that your image appears in a household's montage is a way for the people in that house to lay claims on you as a person, someone whom they are entitled to ask for help and assistance. Instead of reducing these things to vehicles for memory, or seeing them as full agents in their own right, I have attempted, as the people I describe themselves do, to maintain a balance between these two approaches (Navaro-Yashin 2009). Neither Gellian abduction nor Latourian essence, we may say that the potency of the display is its capacity to hold this flickering multiplicity in place.

Although people move away from the house throughout the year, and the house itself moves to different locations, a sense of connectedness between people is maintained through objects displayed on top of and around the household chest. Photographic montages, portraits of deceased elders, and shrines that honour the land masters of different places outwardly display relations, with infinite connections in a visible form. Such foregrounded relations may subside at different periods in a person's life, but can always re-emerge and be drawn upon again. These forms are not simply about preserving the intricacies of person-to-person relations. They also reach out to others, reminding them of their obligations and connections, and replicate relations between groups. Photographic montages make visible a household's infinite network of relations to others. When people

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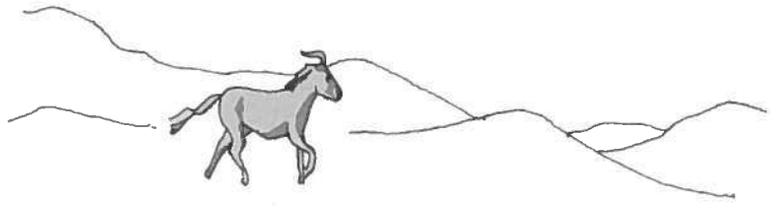
look at their own montage, however, the photographs evoke personal memories of people and events. This dual aspect—that objects both trigger personal memories and occupy a subject position in their dealing with people—points to the unstable and flickering relationship between objects that come to stand for people and objects that are held to have the potential to act on others beyond mediating the intentions of their makers (Fausto 2007: 523). While people move to different places in the landscape and are separated from each other at certain times of the year, the household chest can be said to gather people and forces together in a single space. For the person who tends and adds to the display, there is a sense that, although they move to different seasonal places, the chest's visible surface remains as a fixed site inside the house that increases over time. We may say that it is not so much a person's physical presence, but their attachment through various things at a house that creates their connection to a particular household.

In contrast, as we focus on embroideries, private albums, and remembrance books, these appear as biographical objects that speak more to their owners than to their viewers (Hoskins 1998). Because embroideries expose their makers to the scrutiny of others, they are also very measured and controlled projections of a person's capacities and capabilities. In turn, private albums and school books trace past relations that are honoured precisely because they contain the potential for future connections. Both the photographic montage and embroideries oscillate between indexes for the self and media that allow people to present the world to others in a very particular way. In this sense, we may talk of these objects as a kind of shield, or outer clothing, in which people display and conceptually create salient aspects of their personhood. The household's interior anchors meetings between people in a fixed visible form. This technology is meant to be seen. Its efficacy, as I will show in the next chapter, acts as a shield against those relations that are concealed.

PART TWO
SEPARATION AS GROWTH



4

Boundaries and their Transgression

Photographs, portraits, and embroideries displayed inside the house reveal people embedded in relations with others. These artefacts may be viewed as extensions of the people attached to a house and it is hoped that they will grow and expand to include others. The chest's visible surface creates a platform on which people, who may be absent from each other, are made to appear together in a single site. Inside the chest, and concealed from general view, are hidden things that have been detached from people at moments of separation and transformation. In contrast to the networks of people displayed on the chest's surface, the inside of the chest reveals a world in which, from birth onwards, various practices ensure that people separate themselves from certain connections in order to establish a more singular mode of subjectivity. Here we see the need to sever connections and enact discontinuities between persons. These separations are the means by which people seek to secure certain kinds of futures for themselves and for the wellbeing of their children. They point to the idea that curtailment and limit is also a form of relationship (see Strathern 1996). Personhood thus appears as a process of crafting, which involves displaying aspects of oneself that link one to groups of people, while also concealing or separating oneself from others (cf. Fausto 2007: 506).

Alongside valued clothes, notebooks, albums, winter boots, and precious documents, items hidden at the bottom of chests include actual body parts, such as pieces of umbilical cords and tufts of children's hair from the first hair-cutting ceremony. These pieces are not passed on over generations and are very rarely handled or exposed to view. Carefully placed at the bottom of the chest, they are individually wrapped in blue ceremonial silk scarves (*hadag*), as if they have the *potential* to move but must be contained. Like relations based on the idea of 'shared blood' (*tsusan holboo*), they are the product

of the separation and movement of people and are created out of alliance and exchange in one's own lifetime. I will focus on the ways in which these pieces are produced, extracted, and tended to, as well as the kinds of transformations these pieces are said to engender. This involves a focus on the way in which children and women perform kinship in their everyday lives. It reveals that relations based on shared bone do not emerge as a given totality, nor do they have all the normative power as protagonists of the overarching importance of descent-based kinship in Mongolia would have us believe (see Introduction). Instead we see how people improvise, subvert, connect, or cut off from these relations in their everyday life.

It is important to highlight that when pieces such as umbilical cords or tufts of hair are detached, a transformation is held to occur in two ways. First, they effect a transformation for the person from whom they have been separated. When children are born, the umbilical cord is kept inside the chest as a way of drawing them away from liminal relations with others and binding them to the home. Secondly, gathering these pieces together is held to have an efficacious quality. Like the portion of offerings retained from the *ovoo* ceremony, which are stored inside the fortune bag, or the pieces of tail hair contained in the house, the presence of these parts inside the chest is said to gather further fortune for the household. For example, a family with many healthy children is referred to as a 'family with many umbilical cords' (*hüi büten ail*). Animation attributed to the gathering of such bodily parts is associated with reproductive continuity and the fertility of the household (cf. Lock 2002).

Focus on objects concealed inside the chest shows that people are not born as discrete autonomous subjects. Instead, they have to separate themselves from their connection to various others. A major concern is the separation of infants from various 'polluting' influences that may cause them harm. Tending to infants in this way provides adults with the opportunity to reflect on the boundaries of their households, on uncertain social relations in the district, and on the circulation of goods and people. Concern about the liminal position of infants among their human kin points to wider concerns among the Buriad to do with their own liminal position in Mongolia. This anxiety does not just relate to past experiences and to a history of migration. As people risk what wealth they do have in the emerging neoliberal economy, they have also to negotiate new kinds of boundaries and balance the risks of new kinds of relationships based ideas to do with trust and intimacy. I will examine this liminal position in relation to infants and daughters-in-law, but suggest that an interstitial position—of being attached to, yet separate from, others—points to a way of being that extends to other

periods in a person's life. This is particularly the case because, as we will see in Chapter 6, people may also be viewed as the rebirth of deceased elders. In such a way, this interstitial mode, or form of subjectivity, is associated with children, but it is not something that is exclusively indexed to age.[1] In relation to this, Das (1989) has suggested that children are sometimes considered as full persons in domains to which adults do not have access. A mother talks her child into being, but in so doing her actions crucially stem from her child's agency. Through this way of presenting the world to the child, both adults and children behave and act differently. Das (1989) suggests that rather than forcing children into the world of adults, 'the world of the child becomes a model for the world of the adult' (1989: 278). Thus, she specifies that 'childhood is not only a stage of life; it is a *modality of being*' (1989: 285, italics added). If childhood is viewed as a modality of being, then it is not only children who experience this modality.

The idea that people shift between modes of being may recall Astuti's (1995) description of the 'kindedness and un-kindedness of people' among the Vezo of Madagascar. Here, social forms assumed by people in relation to one another define the status of that relationship at a particular moment in time. In such a way, the 'kindedness' of people can be a distinction based on performance and perception rather than essential substance (Astuti 1995: 154).[2] The Mongolian term '*shig*' points to the idea of being 'like' or 'similar' to something or other and denotes a performative mode of being. For example, Mongolians do not have a term for 'childhood'; instead they use the term 'child-like' (*hüühed shig*) to denote a set of clustered characteristics associated with children which can be applied to anyone regardless of age. This does not suggest that people are comparable to children, but that the concept of childhood is here perceived as a wider category than what we might at first recognize or be familiar with. It points to a more fluid way of being, which may be similar to that experienced at other periods in one's life. Referring to the idea of performative modes of being, I mean to highlight that people may shift from one modality or another throughout their life

[1] Following Kristeva (1982), the term 'subjectivity' offers an alternative to conventional understanding of the 'self' as an autonomous being, and points to the idea that people are better understood as subjects whose subjectivity changes and shifts (McAfee 2005: 2). The notion of subjectivity is simultaneously about subjection to power (of different kinds), as well as being the subject of one's own experience (see Lambek 2002: 25).

[2] In Mongolian, the term 'kind' (*töröl*, also meaning species and sort), and '*töröl sadan*', meaning a set of relatives, is linked to shared substance and points to essentialist ideas that one is born with particular innate characteristics (Bawden 1997), although I would suggest that these are also performative modes of being. The term *töröl* has been subject to change throughout Mongolian history.

(see Chapter 6). I turn now to the way in which pieces of umbilical cords and children's hair are produced through certain practices that are linked to ideas about 'shared blood'.

Umbilical relations

The concept of 'sharing the same blood' originates in having shared the same womb as one's siblings (*umai negt, zulai gishgej törsön*) and the umbilical cord with one's mother. As a mode of relatedness, it is also linked to the movement of women, as affines, across agnatic groups (Stafford 1995, 2000a, 2003). By contributing her blood, in the form of children, a woman fixes her position among her husband's kin. These relations differ from those based on 'shared bone' in that they are not contained in any directly visible location, nor are they attended to in communal ceremonies, such as those at stone cairns or in photographic montages. Instead, they are realized through a special type of 'communication' (*eh ürsiin holboo, hüün holboo, tsusan holboo*, lit. umbilical communication, blood communication) that allows people to have anticipations, feelings, and premonitions about each other (*sovin tatah*, lit. premonition is pulling at me), even though they may be separated in terms of place.[3]

As children grow and leave the home, relations between a mother and her children, and between siblings, continue. While her daughter Baigal was studying in Ulaanbaatar, for instance, Delgermaa would sometimes begin to feel pain in her body, have bad dreams, and sense that her daughter might be in danger, only to find out later that she had fallen ill or she was experiencing some difficulty. Letters that I received from Delgermaa when I was in Cambridge often included descriptions of her dreams about me that made her anxious and eager to hear my news. And when I returned after a long period of absence, she would sometimes say, 'I dreamt you were coming,' or one of her sons would tell me 'Mother had a dream a few nights ago that you would come.' In mentioning this, Delgermaa was not boasting that she had some extraordinary ability and could predict things. Rather, telling us about her premonitions was a means by which she established an intimacy, a sense that we were connected and that she thought about us in our absence.

Umbilical relations are especially strong between a mother and her

[3] Twins, I was told, have a particularly strong umbilical connection. If one twin falls ill or suffers, the other may do so too. In order to lessen the effects of this relation, twins go through a ritual whereby a piece of red rope, tied between their wrists, is severed. After this, the older twin calls the younger twin older sibling (*ah*) while the younger twin calls the older twin younger sibling (*düü*).

daughter. It is generally anticipated that daughters will leave their natal home on marriage. In this sense, daughters embody the potential for absence that they fulfil in later life; they are referred to as 'other people's children' (*öör ailyn ohin hüühed*), a term that anticipates their impending separation and casts them as partial outsiders in their natal family. This partial 'outsider position' is something that is further extended when a woman moves to her in-laws and becomes a daughter-in-law. Daughters-in-law in one family are referred to as 'one family's daughters-in-law' (*neg ailyn ber*). A woman is, thus, neither the daughter of her parents' household, nor a full kin member among her affines. In turn, the children she produces are seen as belonging to her in-laws. For instance, it is common for mothers in Ashinga to leave their children with their in-laws if they work in cities for part of the year (see also Bulag 1998: 24). If a couple separate, it is usual for the children to be cared for by the father's parents. I use the term 'separate' rather than 'divorce' (the term *salah* means both to separate and to divorce) because many of the young couples I knew lived with their husband's family at the beginning of their marriage, while the woman gave birth to children. After this, they often lived apart for some time, as one person went to work in the city, for example, and their children were cared for by the husband's parents. It is important to stress that separating in this way is not simply the result of economic pressures and the desire to seek work outside the district. Tsendmaa sometimes spent part of the year in a mining town working in a small kiosk in order to get away from her husband who drank and was sometimes violent towards her (something that was well-known in the district where her intermittent separation was seen as an acceptable way of coping with this). Women in their twenties described how, even if you lived separately from your husband, he could come to your home, demand food and sexual intercourse, and stay for as long as he pleased. If he sensed that you might be seeing someone else, he might even stay for longer. To separate, then, crucially means the possibility of return. It is rare for people to divorce in the legal sense, not least because the alliance between the two families through marriage would be broken and a woman might lose touch with her children. Unless a partner dies, or the relationship is totally unsustainable, it is common for people to remain attached to their marriage partners even though they may not always live together.

Despite the sense of young women being separate or outside their husbands' family, through umbilical relations women maintain a connection with their children throughout their life. Even children who have been adopted, it was often stressed to me, are not exempt from this tie to their birth mother. Adoption (*örgömöl*) is a term that captures varied practices not

usually associated with the term 'adoption' in the English language. First, in the absence of children, a man may adopt a child from his relatives, usually an elder brother (*ah düügiin hüühed*) (see Appendix C for an example of this kind of adoption and Appendix A, household No. 2). Secondly, an older man without children may adopt his younger sister (*ner avah*, lit. to take his name), in order that she may carry his name as a temporary procedure before she is married and he has adopted other children. Thirdly, political persecution in the 1930s forced children who had lost their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers to be adopted by any living male family member. Finally, temporary adoption is often practised in the case of families with frequent infant mortalities (*hüühed togtdoggüi ail*) where parents place their child in a 'family with many children' (*hüi buten ail*, lit. families with many umbilical cords).[4] Alongside these different forms of adoption, children in the countryside are highly mobile as they are usually fostered for part of the year while attending school in the city or district centre, where they may stay with a distant relative or family friend. In return for staying there, these children take on household tasks, such as cleaning, collecting water and firewood, or cooking, and their birth parents further compensate the fostering family by sending meat and dairy products. Through this movement, children experience living with a range of different caregivers throughout the year.

Umbilical relations do not just span between people. People also have an umbilical relation to the land on which they were born (*hüün holbootoi nutag*). Erdenebat explained one afternoon as I sat talking to him while he was fixing someone's radio in his house in the district centre:

> The umbilical cord is a channel that gives life to a person, from a mother to her children. This channel remains throughout one's life. One also has this relationship with the land. One is tied to one's birthplace like one is tied to one's mother. So too has one's birthplace nurtured one. Like a mother, then, one has an umbilical relation or communication with the land. For example, I was born near an *ovoo* and grew big on that land. If I am ill and far away from my birthplace then I will think of that *ovoo* and do libations to it and I will receive strength from it.

Similarly, one's 'umbilical mother' (*hüi eej*, lit. umbilical mother, *ölgii eej*, lit. mother of the cot; or *babushka*, a Russian term for an older woman), the person who traditionally severed the umbilical cord at birth, is someone to whom one is not necessarily related in a biological sense, yet is someone

[4] See Pao (1964b) and Galdanova (1992) for adoption practices among Mongol and Buriad families with frequent infant mortalities, and Raurkhanova (1992) for child-rearing practices among the Buriad.

one acknowledges as having given one the vitality needed for life. While sitting outside the district centre post office one afternoon with an elderly woman, I was confused to hear her say: 'There goes Erdenebold, he is one of my children, look at how healthy and big he has grown!' Erdenebold approached the woman and greeted her as he was on his way to afternoon class. Often a midwife at the local hospital or an elderly woman who has helped deliver many children, the umbilical mother may talk about the number of children she has delivered as if they were her own. People in Ashinga seemed to know their umbilical mothers and spoke about them with respect and fondness. Tsendmaa explained that when she was younger she would enjoy regular visits to her umbilical mother in a neighbouring district. She would receive blessings (*myalaah*) from her in the form of sweets and gifts, which were seen as fortuitous.[5] Not unlike the European concept of a godmother, the umbilical mother is someone upon whom the child can rely in the future for help and advice.

In spite of these lasting connections, it is imperative that people who have relations based on this form of relatedness are physically separated from each other. Women often stressed that relations based on umbilical connection are too close to live with. In this sense, consanguineal relations between a mother and her child may be given at birth, but they are not sustainable in life. Instead, these relations have to be transformed. It was suggested to me that when a child is first born, the mother and child merge into and become one another so that the mother's body becomes child-like (*eejiin bie nyalhardag*, lit. a mother's body becomes like an infant), expectantly craving sweets and gifts from visitors and strangers. During this period, the mother and infant do not so much merge to become one body. Rather, they merge as a product of the umbilical relationship they share between them (cf. Strathern [1988] 1990: 125). Talking about her own experiences of giving birth, Tsendmaa explained that 'after giving birth, women enter into the world "like-children" (*hüühed shig*). For a month or so they become "infantile" (*nyalhrai*).'[6] Another time, the kindergarten cook in the district

[5] 'Blessing' refers here to an exchange that does not demand a return. See Humphrey ([1998] 2001: 398 and 548, footnote 53) for a similar discussion of the *myalaah* festival in Buryatia and of the fertile potency of the gifts received during this festival.

[6] The term 'infantile' is an extension of the term 'infant' and points to the idea that people can take on qualities or characteristics associated with infancy. Young infants are often referred to as 'damp newborn children' (*nyalh noiton hüühed*). Many purification practices involve countering this dampness with the use of fire, soot, and the circling of burning embers from the hearth. Women who have recently given birth are associated with this fluid way of being. In a metaphorical sense, this fluidity (associated with wetness and the flow of blood) is countered by the dryness/bones of the male household and hearth.

centre eagerly took me aside as I was about to visit her daughter who had recently given birth and explained in excited tones that I must make sure to offer some gift to the young woman when I visited, even if just some sweets. If these were not received, by either her or her child, she explained, her breasts would start to ache and she would be suspended in a position of infantile desire (*gor'doh*, lit. to anticipate/hope for something from somebody), unable to produce milk for her child.[7] This state of vulnerability and anticipation on the part of the mother is said to mirror the state of her infant.

The idea that women and young infants mimic each other is linked to the liminality of childbirth. Young mothers often explained that giving birth makes a woman, for a period, vulnerable and 'other' as a human. She is said to experience a physical vulnerability which, although not posing a direct threat to others, means that women have to observe certain restrictions in order to prevent their potential separation, or death (see also Humphrey with Onon 1996: 169, Diemberger 1993: 114–15). My friend Ichinhorloo, who had recently become a mother, commented:

> A woman with a young infant (*nyalh hüühed*) can become ill or susceptible to pollution (*buzartah*). For one month, after she has given birth, she must observe her body with caution (*bie gam aldahgüi*, lit. caution for the body). During this period a woman's body is considered fragile (*emzeg*), she should not wash too often, go to funerals, go outside in the cold or wind, put her hands in cold water or wash clothes, or her body will not have time to restore itself and she can be permanently affected.

Further, with age, these risks changed. 'It is important for a woman to give birth before the age of thirty,' elder women warned me. 'After this, your pelvic bones progressively begin to harden.' During and after pregnancy women are considered vulnerable and, although not acknowledged as polluting *in* themselves, they are forced to avoid contact with certain places, objects, and people and perform various cleansing practices that assist in restoring their bodies.[8] Commenting on Aginski Buriads in Buryatia, Vesnina (2002) suggests that these practices allow for a woman's transformation from one kind of person to another. Indeed, it was common for women in Ashinga to receive part of their dowry from their parents, such as milking

[7] Breastfeeding is important for the survival of an infant. Various practices, such as massaging or rubbing a bear's paw or a stolen twin's sock over the breasts, ensure the flow of milk. These items hang at the household chest. Extended breastfeeding, until four or five years of age, is common and is in part used as a form of contraception.

[8] See Diyakonova (1987) and Galdanova (1992) for details about taboos for women in Siberia after they have given birth, including the idea that a woman must pass incense around herself before she goes near to the hearth.

cows, only after they had given birth.[9] By observing certain restrictions after she has given birth a woman goes some way in transforming herself and creating a necessary distance from her child, separating their shared physicality. Yet, while women tend to adhere to practices that separate them from intense attachment to their infants and stabilize their bodies, young infants are subject to more prolonged attention that transforms them into human kin. Below I discuss this process in some detail. I think we can discern from this a kind of template for other kinds of separation that people experience in later life. As people live apart from each other for parts of the year, the value placed on attachment through separation is something that is learnt at an early age. It allows for a particular type of sociality associated with blood relations, separated or concealed pieces, the mobility of subjectivities in intra-kin rebirths, at marriage, and during other kinds of transformation.

The liminality of infancy

Ethnographic accounts of the ways in which infants are incorporated as human kin fall, broadly speaking, into two main kinds. The first assumes that infants and children are almost object-like entities that are socialized through particular rituals on behalf of adults. Through complex processes of separation, transformation, and re-integration, an infant is typecast as a blank slate on to which social life is inscribed (Van Gennep [1909] 1960; Turner 1969).[10] These accounts tend to focus on the process of becoming kin through a series of marked stages, or rites of passage, and children are often socialized in specific ways for the purpose of sustaining reciprocal relationships between kin (Stafford 1992, 2000b). Once they have undergone these transformations, they are held to have the capacity for relations with their human relatives (Bloch 1992; Diemberger 1993; Szynkiewicz 1982). Emphasis in these accounts is placed on techniques of reproducing a social order that ensures a life of connections between people.

In contrast, other accounts have emphasized the particular agency of infants, where infants must be tended to in certain ways because they maintain relations with various non-human others. Here, infants may be classed as liminal persons, comparable to a shaman or diviner (Gow 2000; Gottlieb

[9] These cattle are a 'piece' of her natal family's herd and are meant not for selling or eating, but for the reproduction of her own herds at her in-laws (cf. Hangalov 1958).

[10] Anthropological literature about initiates often presupposes that prior to initiation a child's status is similar to that of an infant.

1998; Szynkiewicz 1982). When children are attributed special augury or omen-like abilities, they are not simply submitted to cultural forms of socialization. Instead, parents have to attend carefully to the needs and desires of their infants in order to ensure their children want to form lasting relations with them, as they attempt to coax or 'win' their children away from other relations (Gow 2000; Gottlieb 1998; Stafford 1992; Szynkiewicz 1982).[11] Gottlieb (2004), for example, refers to a host of different practices deployed by Beng caretakers to make the life of infants comfortable and attractive so that they will not be tempted to return to the spirit world (Gottlieb 2004: 87).

Accounts of how parents try to coerce an infant into relations with humans echo the complex view of infants among the families I lived with (cf. Diyakonova 1987; Galdanova 1992; Kinney 1995; Kon 1983; Szynkiewicz 1982). Here, infants are frequently attributed capacities that make them different from other people, such as the ability to see things that are invisible to normal modes of sight. Although a progressive humanizing process does take place (which includes adult-initiated rituals such as the hair-cutting ceremony), I focus on parental practices used to ensure infants sever relations with non-human others and establish themselves among their human kin.[12] Focus on these practices reveals that Buriad infants, like their mothers, have to jettison a part of themselves which is considered difficult or threatening for humans through a process of 'abjection', in Kristeva's (1982) sense of the term.

In Ashinga, elder women commented that infants are commonly viewed as pure, with bright eyes indicating beautiful thoughts (*saihan setgeltei*). Mothers and female elders often commented that young children are viewed as almost god-like (*amtai burhan, baastai burhan*, lit. a god with breath and a god that defecates). The value of children is exemplified in a common saying:

> With one child a person has no children,
> With two children a person has half a child,
> With three children a person has one child.[13]

The logic of this saying is that if one has one child it may die or move away, if one has two children, one may die and the other may move away, if one has three children, one may die, one may move away, but one may stay with you. The idea that children are valued is nevertheless combined with a sense that, as humans, the bodies of infants are fragile and weak (*hevreg*). Talking with women who had given birth to many children, I learnt how the souls of young children are not fully secured to their bodies and are liable to separate from them at the slightest fright (*hölstöi hüühed / hölssön hüühed*). Infants (*nyalh noiton hüühed*, 'child in swaddling' *mantsuitai hüühed*, and 'child with cot', *ölgiitöi hüühed*, that is, ordinarily those younger than one year of age) are also held to have the capacity to see and sense all kinds of invisible things, which is an ability that not all humans have. These aspects make them fragile (*emzeg*) and susceptible to soul-loss, expressed through signs of discomfort, such as crying persistently for no reason, catching a cold or fever, or just behaving in an unusual way. Saran, Bat-Ochir's wife, with whom I lived in the district centre at the beginning of my fieldwork, explained, 'until a child is eight years of age it is clean, and pure. Before eight it can become polluted (*buzar*). Between the age of one and three a child is sensitive and fragile.' While an adult can live (albeit with illness, pain, and sadness) with soul-loss and low vitality-fortune (*süns zailah, hiimorgüi*) until a specialist calls their soul back (*süns duudah*), if an infant's soul departs, he is unable to sustain his life in the human world.

A range of different things may cause soul-loss in infants. Deceased infants' souls (*süns*), or 'bad spirit messengers' (*erlegiin elch*) sent to Earth by their king (*Erlegiin Nomuun Haan*), for instance, may attempt to appropriate the bodies of young infants in order to live in this world.[14] In so doing, they join the cycle of human rebirth. Fausto (2007) comments on a similar idea. 'A common conception in Amazonia is that the baby's vital principle is not securely attached to the body and can be captured. The baby has not yet been entirely fabricated as a member of its community and can be made into kin by other people, animals, or enemies' (Fausto 2007: 505). It is not just the souls of deceased children that may unsettle a young infant. Seemingly ordinary actions outside the home, like that of a girl pulling off small shoots from a bush near to a stream, for example, can aggravate

[11] By 'win' I refer to the parental struggle against the desires of infants to leave the human world for that of the spirits.

[12] Literature on these practices among Buriads in Siberia is extensive, while almost completely absent in the Mongol literature. This may reflect the concern of Buriad and Russian ethnographers, or it may point to the Buriad's concern with infant protection practices more generally.

[13] *Neg hüühedtei hüniig hüühedgüi gene, hoyor hüühedtei hüniig hagas hüühedtei gene, gurvan hüühedtei hüniig neg hüühedtei gene.*

[14] A strikingly similar idea is depicted in Cao Xuequin's ([1760] 1977) novel set in a Manchu household (or Chinese, as it is now thought that Cao Xuequin was a Han Bannerman) in the early eighteenth century. An old woman from the countryside advises one of the noble women about her ill child: 'She may have caught a cold from the wind as you say. On the other hand, children of her age, being pure of body, often have the second sight. It could have been brought on by seeing a spirit. If I was you, I'd have a look in the Almanac, just in case. You never know, the child might have been pixified' ([1760] 1977: 324).

the land masters and spirits of surrounding rivers and landscape (*gazryn / baigalyn ezed, lus savdag, uul savdag*). When she returns home, it is an infant, the most vulnerable person in the house, who would be affected by such an infraction. Unlike the souls that want to appropriate the bodies of children, such acts may simply bring harm to children as spirits attempt to punish people if they have committed some infraction (Humphrey 1997: 28–9).[15]

The idea of 'pollution' (*buzar*) is also an important factor in why people perceive infants as vulnerable. People often warned me of the possibility of 'becoming polluted' (*buzartai*) when eating hunted or 'foreign' meat, from interactions with certain drunk or aggressive people, through engagement with various objects that have belonged to others, or through travel to distant places or other households. It is important to note that people do not become polluted *from* spirits and land masters. Rather, these invisible agents may take revenge on people by sending curses (*lusyn haraal*), an outcome of which may manifest itself in the form of pollution that defiles the person in some way. An infant could see/feel these different kinds of pollution and become scared by them, resulting in their physical illness. Concern about pollution thus points to a fear of transgression and to matter out of place. It highlights ideas about boundaries and people's proper relation to them, separating off some in order to contain others. It also points to the idea of the person, or the human body, as open to external invisible forces that permeate or attach themselves to objects and to living things, which only young children can see.

Harnessing the child to the human world

In order to protect infants from such threats, it is very common for parents to attach a red piece of material (*tseer*, lit. taboo) to the front door of their home in both the district centre and the countryside as soon as an infant is born. This fluttering piece of material signals to visitors that a young infant is inside and that only household members may enter.[16] Needless to say, this sometimes meant that I had to undergo considerable purification rituals before I could visit certain households with young infants.

[15] Demons (*chötgör*) or evil spirits (*bug*) may also harm children if they pass through areas in the landscape where they are said to roam.

[16] See Hamayon and Bassanoff (1973: 23), 'a piece of red material or rope is stretched between three stakes to indicate that it is forbidden to enter a household with an infant. This taboo is motivated by the vulnerability of the newborn against any supernatural forces' (my own translation). See also Chabros (1992) and Pao (1966: 418–19, 422, 426).

Figure 4.1 Taboo flag attached to doorway.

The doorway is a particularly potent threshold across which people attempt to control the flow of various forces, artefacts, goods, and people. Actual saws and dried hedgehog skins are often hung above the inside of the doorframe to prevent any 'bad things' (*muu yüm*) from entering. Attending to that which comes in and out, and acting as a kind of filter, these objects are held to keep external threats from entering and to preserve good things from leaving. As a way to further protect and incorporate their infants into their surrounding environments, parents often mark the child's forehead with hearth soot and bury the child's placenta (Bur. *toonto*) in the ground outside the family house (or underneath the mother's bed) with small offerings of rice and coins in a white cotton sack (cf. Shirokogoroff [1929] 1979: 276). The placenta is not attributed to a person's female

(mother/blood) or male (father/bone) side. Rather, it is viewed as a replication or 'shadow' of the child, and is described by some as its 'twin' (cf. Vesnina 2002; Hangalov 1958; Mikhailov 1996). Its presence in the landscape may be viewed as a kind of second self, a home or house which the child lived in before it was born, which is made into a sacrificial thing from which one partially estranges oneself (cf. Bataille 1991: 56). Separating the placenta from the child and burying it in the ground does not mean that the placenta itself grows. Rather, it allows the person from whom it has been separated to grow. What is buried or hidden thus generates growth outside the thing itself.

Like the household chest, which allows people to be separated for long periods but remain attached to a single house, the placenta may be is separated from the child at birth and buried, but people remain connected to this place throughout their life. For instance, people spoke of visiting the place where their placenta was buried, should they fall ill, and rolling around naked on the ground and making offerings of dried curd, rice, and bread. Erdenebat explained to me that through this action people receive strength from their birthplace (*törsön nuitag*).

> When you were born you were pure and healthy. Your placenta contains this state of health and purity. When you lie down on the ground where it is buried, your body absorbs this strength and you are relieved of the predestined problems you have encountered in your life-course. It is like returning to a previous state. By doing this, an old person may live a year longer; an ill or tired person may feel refreshed. This is the relation one has with the place in which one was born.

Of course, it is not always possible to visit one's birthplace, especially if one lives some distance from it. And during the socialist period, women were encouraged to give birth to many children in order to increase the size of the working population, and they often gave birth at the local clinic.[17] At this time they were forbidden to take the placenta home from the clinic. Instead, it was considered a form of waste and was buried in a hole in the clinic grounds. People mentioned that, if they were ill or distressed, they might

[17] By the late 1970s, the state's drive to increase the population meant that women who gave birth to and raised five to seven children were awarded the second-class medal 'Famous Mother'. Women who gave birth to and raised more children were awarded the first-class medal 'Famous Mother'. They were also awarded prize money and had the right to twenty-one days' rest and convalescence once a year without charge at state rest homes or mineral springs (Butler 1982: 485). The distinction between gave birth to and raised is important. It points to the fact that although clinics were widely available, infant mortality was still common. Many women in their fifties and sixties had given birth to more than ten children, but only a few had survived into adulthood.

consider visiting the place outside the hospital where their placentas were buried.

When referring to the place where they were from, people tended to mention where their placenta was buried (Bur. *toonto nuitag*) (cf. Mikhailov 1996: 32–7). Burying the placenta is one way in which the Buriad make the landscape they currently reside in a 'familiar' locality. Neither male nor female, this place marks one's individual relation to a past home, or shadow. When nearing death, people visit this place as a symbolic return to this Other self to whom they were intrinsically attached. Identifying the location of one's placenta can also be to highlight the 'unfamiliarity' of the place in which one currently lives. Elderly people in Ashinga, when talking about their homeland, would sometimes mention that their placenta was in Siberia, across the border, and that before they died their one wish was to visit it again. Declaring where one's placenta is located is to lay claim to a place of origin, a starting point from which one moves to other places, but to which one remains connected throughout one's life. The concept of 'homeland', it seems, is created by *giving* a piece of oneself to a place and then moving away from it. Like the mother and the child, who need to separate their shared physicality, attachment to one's homeland is created through this act of separation (this is something I develop later in relation to the household chest). In this sense, we could say that it is not only the act of separation, but also the physical and temporal movement engendered through that separation that generates the growth needed for life.

Women, especially, were keen to emphasize that severing intense attachment to places and people—be it the need to move away from memories of past atrocities, the movement from one seasonal place to another, or the crafting of personhood through severing links with others—is a necessary aspect of life. For the infant, an initial kind of separation is its separation from its placenta, which is buried in the ground. A second kind of separation occurs when the stump of the umbilical cord (*hüü*) dries and drops off from the body. This piece, like the placenta, is buried or contained inside the household chest at the back of the house along with those of other children in the household. Like the placenta, which ties a person to a specific location, the umbilical cord is said to create a tie to one's natal family throughout one's life. The presence of such objects inside the chest also gathers fortune for the family and acts as a form of protection for the child. In this way, people are transformed by this umbilical 'cutting', and by the subsequent separation it engenders.

Scaling inwards from places in the landscape to sites in the house, an infant's cot (*ölgii*) is also used, in a very literal sense, to 'bind' the child to a

specific locale. The Buriad cot is a rather beautiful and unique object. It should be used by as many healthy children as possible and is often made from pieces of material gathered from different households.[18] The cot is held to affect the child who was using it as it accumulated the fortune of the children who have lain in it, ensuring its health and wellbeing. It is suspended from a wooden hook in the beams in a corner of the house near to the mother's bed. From its ropes hangs a protective felt fox talisman (*esgii üneg*), and a multi-layered triangular silk decoration (*teeg*) is tied beside it. These items form a focal point for the swaddled infant and capture any possible descending harm (cf. Shirokogoroff [1929] 1979: 280–1).[19] Alongside this, a sheep's tibia bone (*shaant chömög*) may be attached, or a miniaturized needle and thread, or wooden bow and arrow (cf. Curtin [1909] 1971: 96–7). Children are tightly swaddled and bound with three ropes in this suspended and mobile home, which is rocked gently every now and then, for several months.

Drawing upon Casey's (1996) idea of 'intentional threads' that bind a person's body to a place in a complex of relations, we can begin to see that an infant, swaddled in several cloths and bundled together with three ties, with hearth soot marking its forehead, is kept secure in the household in a fixed 'field of localization' for the first year of its life (Casey 1996: 22). Indeed, the cot, the umbilical cord in the chest, and the placenta in the ground can be viewed as fractal versions of the house. They provide a 'facilitating environment' in Winnicott's (see Gomez 1997) sense of the term, allowing the child to be fixed within the boundaries of a particular place and protected from certain intersubjective threats. In harnessing an infant to a particular place, parents hope that their child's body will stabilize and its perceptions will stem from a situated single location.

Disguising, tricking, and diverting attention

Although children are located spatially in the home and surrounding environment, I quickly learnt from young women that infants are also subjected to a number of everyday practices that involve disguising, tricking, and diverting attention away from their human qualities. These involved parents tending to their infants with various kinds of seemingly dismissive actions that are held to trick invisible agents into viewing infants as object-like non-humans and undesirable targets for their attention. In order to disguise the infants' human qualities, even after they have been given personal names, they are often referred to as 'ugly dog', 'dirty', and 'ugly', further disguising any human characteristics.[20] Parents may also conceal the child's

[18] Some people mentioned that it was good to make the cot using the material of a foreign person's underwear. See Szynkiewicz (1982: 238) for a similar idea: 'Clothes coming from the "other world" can be interpreted as a sign that its powers have taken the child in trust . . .' For a description of another type of Buriad cot, see Johansen (1963: 208–9).

[19] Pieces of the child's hair are sometimes stuffed inside these triangle decorations, which often also have a felt fox attached to them. The fox is considered a trickster; it teases the child into thinking it has momentarily been abandoned by its parents while also chasing away potential harm.

Figure 4.2 Buriad cot with felt fox talisman.

[20] People have several names: (1) their long name given by an elder male or female relative or religious practitioner a few days after birth, (2) a family nick-name, and (3) their kin term in relation to other relatives.

…oon while sitting at home with Togtoh, the kindergarten …, she explained the gender reversal she had performed …he was younger: 'When he was born,' she explained, 'I …n because I lost his older brother. Until he was three years …led as a girl and we always dressed him in ribbons and …may also be dressed in old clothes that have been used by …nsuring that the fortune that ensured the survival of the previous wearers protects them.[21] Fortune is here a kind of wealth that can be passed around. It attaches itself to you and takes the form of fertility in children and animal herds.

These kinds of practices do not simply effect children. They have a strong impact on one's daily interactions with others. One afternoon, while staying in the district centre, I suggested to Tsendmaa that we visit a nearby family who had a young infant. She said this would be good especially since she would not have gone there unless I did, but wanted to see the infant because she was curious. As we entered the yard of the family's household, we were instructed to carry in wood from their woodpile to feed their hearth, disguising our status as visitors. After placing the wood near to the fire, little attention was paid to the actual infant. Instead we sat and made small talk over tea. It was not until we started discussing the number of children who had colds in the district that my friend indirectly asked how the infant was getting on. The woman hastened to reply, 'He is fine,' and then changed the topic, focusing on other members of their family. When we were preparing to leave, Tsendmaa walked over to the cot and said, 'What an ugly child' (*yamar muuhai hüühed ve*), rocked the cot a little, and turned to walk out. In this account we see that people attend to young infants through diverting and concealing their attachment. Establishing a relation through detachment can be said to mirror the spatial and temporal dislocations that people experience in later life, when they move to different locations, remaining apart from each other for long periods.

Other ways of interacting with infants are also performed by mothers to ensure their children are safe. Every evening while I was living at Bat-Ochir's house in the district centre, Saran would close the curtains of their home so that 'bad invisible things' (*muu hii yüüm*) could not see inside, and she would

[21] Elders often spoke of '*hüühed ugaalga*', a ceremony involving women and children spitting fat into the hearth fire at the birth of a new infant, further suggesting that children who have survived the vulnerable period of early infancy can bestow fortune on the newborn infant. At this ceremony an infant may also be washed in the broth made from a sheep sacrificed at their birth. See Galdanova (1992) for a description of a similar type of ceremony called 'calling of happiness to children' (*hüühded jargal duudah*).

take care to burn incense around each of us in order to clear away any external polluting things that we might have inadvertently contaminated ourselves with during the day (cf. Chabros 1987: 258). She would bring in any of the children's clothes or toys from outside, and make sure that her young child was securely contained inside the house. Carried out privately upon completion of other chores, actions like these were hardly ever spoken about explicitly. Indeed, these practices appeared, at first, to be endless actions of sorting and rearranging objects inside the home, but I gradually came to realize that they were strategies employed to protect children.[22] One evening at home, as Saran was washing her young son inside, I briefly went outside to the outhouse. Upon my return she looked up from her chores and said, in a critical manner, 'You shouldn't go outside while I'm doing this in the evening. Bad things roam around at twilight and you could carry them in with you from outside.' Here, things from outside are thought to potentially pollute those inside the house, contaminating them and blocking the circulation of fortune. In so doing, misfortune comes to take on an almost object-like quality; it attaches itself to things in an almost physical way. Women get rid of the capacity of these forces to act in the household by purifying objects and people with incense.

Fear of pollution warrants elaborate precautionary techniques for families who have suffered frequent infant mortalities (*hüühed togtdoggüi ail*, lit. a family with children who do not survive). Infants born to such families may be temporarily housed with families that have many children. By pretending that an infant belongs to another family, people hope to prevent the souls of their deceased children from appropriating the physical body of the young infant, thereby perpetuating the cycle of loss. Togtoh explained that because she came from a family of one girl and nine boys, a neighbouring family had placed their child with them as a way to ensure its survival.

> When I was younger we had a neighbour who gave birth to three boys, all of whom died. The mother of the family came to us and asked if she could give birth to her next child at our house . . . because in our family there are as many boys as there are cattle. That child grew up with us. He is like our family member and worships our protective deities (*sahius*) because he was born at our hearth (*gal golomt*). His placenta was also buried near to ours. Later when he was about three years old he returned to his family but he would

[22] Among the Beng in West Africa, adults also spend a great deal of time cleansing their children of dirt or defilement held to come from the spirit world (*wɩgbe*) from which they themselves have recently come and which may cause them harm in this world (Gottlieb 2004: 115).

> sometimes get ill. His mother would say, 'Ah, you are not my child, you are Baatar Bavai's child. You were born in his house,' and they would send him to our house and he would get better.

By disguising the child as belonging to another family, people also hope that their child will act as a kind of vault or vessel that harnesses some of this family's fortune as their own. Like the collected umbilical cords or pieces of tail hair, the presence of these children is thought to have an effect on the child's survival.

Equally, in a context where women may have given birth to five or more children but only two survive, the slow introduction of children into the human world, and people's gradual attachment to infants, is also a way for people to cope with their potential loss and separation.[23] While hospitals and clinics were widespread throughout the country during the socialist period, in the 1990s medical professionals found themselves without salaries and resources. Many doctors, nurses, and veterinarians were forced to leave their professions and joined others herding animals in the far countryside. Throughout Mongolia, seemingly everyday medical treatments became unavailable. As transport and medicine became scarce, women increasingly gave birth at home, infant mortality rates rose, and primary healthcare facilities declined. When access to healthcare facilities is restricted, even simple things like dehydration or diarrhoea can be fatal for one's infant and many young mothers increasingly spend the first few years of their children's lives concerned with a host of different practices that are held to ensure their survival.

Over time, Saran explained to me that she had had another son, prior to the birth of her two children, who had died at the age of seven. Neighbours speculated that in the past Bat-Ochir had ignored his obligation, as the youngest son of his family (*golomt sahih hüü*), to worship at his family cairn. Local land masters, it was thought, might have been aggravated by his neglect. This had caused the misfortune that claimed his only child who choked to death at their summer encampment one afternoon. Later, Bat-Ochir and Saran came to have another child, a daughter, who at age ten, was hit by a car. Pursued by continual misfortune, the family followed a senior Buddhist monk's advice and disguised this girl's human qualities indefinitely by renaming her with the rather beautiful but unusual name 'Silver Aeroplane'. So as to stave off further unwanted misfortune they became preoccupied with protecting their third child by insisting that his hair should not be cut until he was at least six years old, that all his clothes should be obtained second-hand from relatives' children, and at the slightest sign of any distress, the family rushed to Oyunaa, the local diviner, to make sure that he was 'on the right path'. Intertwined in attention for their son was a constant monitoring of themselves. During sessions to cleanse their son they also sought divinatory advice about different decisions, such as when to move pasture, whether they should sell some cattle, whether to send their daughter to school in the city, or who should look after their animals. It is to this space, where attending to the welfare of one's children allows for wider questioning and discussion about people's wellbeing and prosperity, that I turn in the following section.

[23] Local statistics in 2000 indicate that infant mortality rates were low and people spoke of fewer infant deaths than in the past. However, there is some question about whether families would let people know about such deaths or whether the local administration would want to record such figures. While I was in Ashinga in 1999–2000 I knew of three infant mortalities, none of which appeared in official statistics.

Contemplating causes

'Oyunaa by the willows' (*Burgusny Oyunaa*), as she is locally referred to, is by far the most visited of the local diviners. Her house is located along the riverbank that runs just outside the district centre, to the south. To get there you have to walk out of the district and into an area of bushes and trees where a log is placed across the river as a bridge. Oyunaa specializes in identifying pollution and its causes through divination and treats infants and their parents. If a person was seriously ill, they would visit the local clinic, but biomedical treatments were often used in combination with other cures, coexisting side by side with them. Even the nurses and doctors, I came to realize, consulted local diviners and shamans, and Oyunaa regularly visited the clinic and performed massages, or bone-setting on concussed patients, or purified people in their hospital beds and helped women in childbirth.

Her popularity was obvious. Of thirteen visitors during a single day, eight people came to enquire why their infant or child had begun to show signs that they may have been polluted, with some coming from as far away as a neighbouring province or the provincial capital. Staying with Oyunaa and her family for extended periods, I observed how people of all ages visited for various treatments and divinations. I would sit next to her as she tended to people's needs and she was keen for me to learn from her. She took me on walks deep into the forest to collect water from sacred underground springs, we climbed mountains to make offerings at *ovoo*s, and she gave me bear-fat and other substances to drink when I was ill. Her attentive engagement and

sense of care certainly played a part in her popularity. It seemed that people were not afraid to reveal their most intimate thoughts and feelings to her. Oyunaa was also an incredibly strong personality, unafraid of speaking her mind and defending her opinions. During the 2000 elections, for example, she stood up in a local community meeting and asked the politician who was canvassing in the area what religion he was. Or, when a local shaman confronted her and asked, 'Are you not scared of me? I can do black things towards you,' she replied, 'I don't know you, so how can I be scared of you? Send me your things and we will see what happens.'

Oyunaa described her work as hard and never-ending but she was driven to help others as she saw her ability as a gift, something that became apparent after the death of one of her own children. Dealing with people's emotional state (*setgel züün*) could be dangerous. The difficult things that she separated people from could attach themselves to her. Every morning she read incantations on her hands and visited an *ovoo* that she had created in the mountains near to her house. These actions were necessary, she insisted, as they caused these bad things to enter into the ground rather than remain attached to her body. Oyunaa's understanding of infants was well known. Many of the people who visited her were young parents with their children. She explained:

> We live in a world that can be seen by human eyes. For example, I can see Rebecca, myself, and this bed. However, there are many 'things with breath' (*amyn yüm*) that cannot be seen by humans. For example, even though there are two or three of us here, there could be many more of us that we cannot see. Anyone could be sitting here. They could be listening to us talking now. If you ask what it is, it is someone's soul (*süns*). It could either be a good or a bad one. Young infants see these invisible things. They sense things in their environment. This makes them fragile (*hevreg*) and vulnerable (*emzeg*). An infant can get scared and uncomfortable so that it is 'with sweat' (*hölstöi*) from many things. If an infant becomes polluted (*buzartsan*), his parents can find out what caused the fright by melting lead or wax [and evaluating how these substances solidify as a means of determining sources of fright] or they may go to see a diviner (*mergeldeg hün*). We cleanse the infant by anointing him with incense (*arts*, *utlaga*) and spring water (*rashaan*). Throwing water outside at the backs of visitors once they leave the house can also drive out maleficent things.[24] Circling hearth smoke around an infant or making offerings to appease spirits and setting children on the right path (*zasal hüüh*) can also clear away bad things. There are many different ways . . .

[24] Some see throwing water out as a 'black' practice because pollution may spread to other homes (cf. Oberfalzerová 2006: 36).

People came to visit on foot, in cars, on horseback, or on motorbikes, and there was hardly a day that went by without someone coming to see her. Sometimes, she invited me to act as her assistant. One early summer evening in June 2000, I went with her when she was called to perform a ceremony for a young couple who lived in a particularly beautiful new wooden house in the district centre. This couple had a young infant and a child of eight years of age. They had recently started a small shop in the district selling goods from the city, such as sunflower oil, cigarettes, biscuits, and vodka. Their business seemed to be going well, but the woman of the house had suddenly fallen ill, along with their young infant. To source the cause of their illness, Oyunaa divined using her nine coins. She explained that because people in the district were jealous of their new house and their seemingly effortless increase in wealth, they had been talking badly of them, cursing them with their black words (*har hel am*, lit. black tongue mouth). They must be careful, she hardly needed to explain, as their house might be targeted and could be burnt down. Here, the harnessed fortune that had allowed them to build their business and house, which so glittered with potential, had generated jealousy and suspicion that wound its way into their lives, threatening their home and family. A purification ceremony was necessary.

The four family members undressed down to their underwear and sat next to each other facing southward, inside a circle of twenty-one butter candles that were placed on the floor. Each person had three threads of red rope tied to their right wrist and three threads of black rope tied to their left ankle. The woman passed incense around each of them twenty-one times while Oyunaa sat outside the circle and rang a bell, recited mantras (*tarni*), and passed her rosary through her fingers. A mug of water was passed around which they spat into each time it passed and Oyunaa asked them to think of the bad things leaving them as they were doing so. Each time the mug circled, Oyunaa threw some hearth soot into the mug. She then cut the thread from each of their wrists and ankles. They wiped each other's backs, faces, and hands eight times with paper dipped in spring water that Oyunaa had prepared for them. As each of the candles extinguished, one at a time, they left the area inside the circle and slowly got dressed. The man of the house gathered all the pieces—the threads, the candles, the used matches, the paper which they had used to wipe themselves, and the hearth soot—into a small bag and buried it in the southern part of the fenced enclosure which surrounded their house. While he was doing this, Oyunaa passed each of their belts through juniper incense (*arts*). The man proceeded to offer milk libations outside. He returned and sprinkled some sand, which Oyunaa had 'enlivened' with a mantra, around the internal confines of the house. Oyunaa

Figure 4.3 Purification ritual involving fire.

then beat each of them three times with her rosary beads across their backs, being careful to rub the beads gently over the infant's head.

The circle of fire, the spitting, the hearth soot, the cleansing in sacred spring water (*rashaan*), and the subsequent beatings were common features of Oyunaa's rituals to cleanse infants and their families, separating them from any maleficent things. Oyunaa also frequently gave children a new, less 'heavy' name (names in Mongolia are thought to affect people; a heavy name refers to a name such as 'Temujin', the name of Chinggis Haan, which would put a lot of pressure on the person carrying it to act in a way that the name demanded), presented them with protective amulets, such as a lock to tie around their waists, or scattered the soil from their birthplace on them.[25] Such practices were held to pacify any maleficent beings, cleanse people from pollution, and 'set one's path right' (*zasal hiih / zöv zamd oruulah*).

When taking part in such practices people often contemplated the causes of their misfortune. Indeed, a common feature of the ritual involved a sudden break or pause. When it seemed that Oyunaa was deep in thought, passing the divining coins between her hands, or preparing incense, she would suddenly ask a very personal or strange question, such as 'What has happened to your sister? Have you suffered from a headache recently? Did you eat some hunted meat on your trip? What about your menstruation, is it regular?' Pausing, reflecting, and discussing aspects of their personal lives with Oyunaa, the intimate details of people's social relations emerged. In this light, attending to the welfare of their children, people came to reflect on wider relations beyond the household. Indeed, many young couples trying to establish their homes in the district centre often worried that they might be the targets of arson (see Chapter 8). It was these families who became Oyunaa's frequent visitors. In these cases, infants seemed to act as mediums through which Oyunaa addressed wider tensions and difficulties between adults. My friend, Ichinhorloo, for example, explained how her six-month-old son had indicated signs of distress after a visit from a drunken man who had various 'bad' things attached to him. Oyunaa suggested she stay at her in-laws until her husband returned. Attending to her advice Oyunaa's clients reflected on relations with others and established ways of attending to them, via attention to their infant's distress. In this sense, talk about one's infant's wellbeing provided the space for wider discussions, whereby women and men spoke in confidence about their (sometimes difficult) relations with others. Discussion of pollution and reprimands from spirits thus seemed to

[25] Nine, twenty-one, or one hundred and nine candles were often placed around the infant and/or their family to separate off any bad things and purify them.

provide an arena in which to reflect on wider fears and anxieties, such as growing social inequalities, the morality of human behaviour, and the effects this may have on people in general. It was also a way to establish boundaries in one's household, and one's social life more generally, out of fear that threatening forces or people might enter from outside. And attending to its presence gave a material form to feelings and emotions, such as uncertainty, fear, and jealousy.

In focusing in such detail on these moments, I want to emphasize that parents divide their attention towards their children via balancing acts of engagement. On the one hand, they attend to their infants' bodily and emotional needs and try to bind them to the household. On the other hand, they are preoccupied with presenting infants as non-human in order to separate them from their potentially fatal relations with others and a merger with themselves.[26] Attending to distressed infants thus bridges the divide between the desire to ensure one's infant's successful livelihood and wellbeing, and tending to them as mediums through which to reflect on wider social relations. Their liminal position provides an opportunity to focus on boundaries more generally and to widespread fears of their transgression. In this sense, we may say that the intense concern with the spiritual and physical wellbeing of one's children is a reflection of a wider concern to do with the wellbeing of the household and with increasing uncertainties about interpersonal relations and issues to do with trust. Lack of transparency about the causes of misfortune extends to more general feelings of unease to do with establishing a household as a young couple, independently from one's relatives.

Bulag (1998) has noted that the Mongolian term 'pollution' (*buzar*) includes ideas about 'polluted blood' (1998: 131), as something that may be passed between people, nations, and ethnicities. Here, maintaining the boundary of the body denotes wider ideas about the health of the nation, or a people. 'Foreign things' (Bulag 1998: 263), of all kinds, may not be absorbed so easily and may be regarded as polluting, be that people or objects that have travelled from outside the boundaries of the household and the familiar. In this sense, pollution is an outcome of people and things that should normally be kept separate becoming mixed. As we have seen, these boundaries may also extend beyond physical interactions. In a broader sense, tending to the 'pollution' of young infants points to unease concerning boundaries, such as inside and outside the household, or visible and invisible

[26] What makes an infant undesirable for humans (non-human/spirit *other-worldly* attributes) is consonant with what makes it unpleasing for spirits (non-human/spirit *this-worldly* qualities).

worlds, or that between the city and the countryside more generally. In tending to things that may threaten their children, people highlight a fear that some outsider might enter their homes and claim what is precious to them.

Figure 4.4 Cleansing a young infant.

This fear may be viewed as an outcome of the Buriad's historical experiences of being classed as outsiders themselves. Not unlike the way in which the state seized Buriad men and forms of private property in the 1930s, the threat of reprimands from outsiders continues. It reflects a more widespread uncertain position that the Buriad feel as they negotiate their own liminal position in Mongolia, concealing or revealing aspects of difference or similarity in various interactions with others. Deep felt concerns to do with the inclusion/exclusion of infants point to similar senses of disquiet

among the Buriad to do with their own position in Mongolia as a nation (both as an ethnic minority and as countryside people as opposed to city dwellers).[27] This unease does not, of course, just relate to past experiences. It also points to the uncertainty of living one's life on another kind of threshold. The emergence of distinct economic differences among households in the district also raises to anxieties concerning those whom one can trust and those whom one cannot trust. As people risk what wealth they do have on new kinds of ventures and projects, involving people inside and outside the district, so too do they have to negotiate the boundaries of new kinds of relationships and the risks that they engender. Here, relations between insiders and outsiders may not be clear-cut, but people try to maintain boundaries in the home for the survival of their households and their children.

Hair-cutting ceremony

Once children have grown and their bodies have become more stable, they are ready for the ritual cutting of their first hair (*daahi*, lit. shaggy or knotted hair). The hair-cutting ceremony is seen to mark a social birth of sorts in which children are incorporated among their human kin (Humphrey 1974a: 479). It is one of the final cuttings that they have to undergo—after the cutting of the umbilical cord, the separation from their placenta (or twin) and their mother, and from their liminal relations with invisible agents and spirits—before they become gendered people. While this ceremony is conducted across Mongolia, among Buriads in Hentii, boys tend to have their hair cut when they reach three or six years of age and girls at age two or four. The child's first haircut is a very private occasion, with only a few family members present. The decision about the right time to cut the child's hair always seems to be intricately tied to wider concerns to do with the domestic history of a particular household, so that it is not so much the ceremony itself which is important but the *time* at which it takes place. The father or eldest male family member tends to decide when it is time to cut the child's hair, after consulting various specialist sources. This alludes to the

[27] Gottlieb (2004) has highlighted that among the Beng in West Africa increasing concern with the spirit world (*wrugbe*) and with infants' longing to return to it may be viewed as symptomatic of a wider cultural nostalgia for an imagined pre-colonial past (Gottlieb 2004: 273). Tending to the lives of infants and the spirit world becomes a means by which adults can express complex senses of loss and violation (Gottlieb 2004: 273–6).

fact that the child will be presented and formally incorporated into the household and that it is the 'master' (*ezen*), the most respected member of the family (the eldest male), who decides *when* the child is ready to do so.

While I was living with Renchin and Delgermaa at their summer encampment, they decided that, at the age of four (counting one year in the womb; *hii nas*, lit. air year), it was finally time to cut their son's daughter's shaggy infantile hair. A 'fortunate day' (*hishigtei ödör*) was chosen and when everyone was gathered, her grandmother brought the child inside and explained to her that they would cut her hair and that she should not be scared as this would 'make grandfather's girl beautiful'. Silently sitting her on his knee, her grandfather cut the first piece of her hair using a pair of sheep-shearing scissors with a ceremonial silk scarf attached. He then signalled to her grandmother, who leaned over and cut the next piece. These strands were put aside and carefully wrapped in a silk scarf to be kept in the household chest along with other valuable objects. Her grandfather then instructed his grand-daughter to stand next to him while he remained seated on a stool and, using a razor, matter-of-factly shaved off the rest of her hair. She was then given some sweets and a little present of a plastic necklace which was placed around her neck by her grandmother. The other children, who had been standing around watching, circled around her, rubbing her head and joking about her new appearance.

Tsendmaa later explained to me that 'once we have cut the child's hair they become a person and we can praise and tease them just like other children'. By placing a piece of the child's first hair in the family chest, children are tied to an extended group of people. There is also a marked change in people's behaviour towards them. Children are directed to participate in different tasks, such as herding sheep and collecting the calves and firewood, and are given food according to age seniority and gender, along with others. Having passed the vulnerable, difficult stages of infancy, the first haircut marks a passage whereby the child is included in daily activities and located in the confines of a particular household.

Daughters-in-law

So far I have suggested that parents and especially young mothers are preoccupied with trying to tie their children to the home. The fact that it is mostly young mothers who perform and tend to these practices is, I think, indicative of their own personal desires to establish a separate household from that of their in-laws. Residing with their parents-in-law, young

mothers such as Tsendmaa, for instance, endure an in-between life stage, prior to establishing their own household. In turn, Delgermaa explained that her second son's frequent distress as a child was exceptionally difficult because it jeopardized an already fraught relationship with her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law used this to claim that Delgermaa was too poor to have married her son and was a bad mother, unable to look after her children. During the socialist period, the household was essentially a creation of the state in order to manage state property. Young couples enjoyed more independence from their parents/in-laws at this time, being sent to work in other districts and allotted separate houses. With the collapse of state socialism, people formed herding groups based on extended family networks. This situation has placed an increased strain on intra-family relations, as people are dependent on their family for their subsistence. Social mobility is not something that one can rely on state institutions to provide; rather, it requires nurturing through personal networks. Observing one's better-off classmates establish separate households, go to university, or move to the city and set up in trade is a source of frustration for some young women who remain with their parents-in-law in the far countryside. This is particularly the case when parents make strategic choices to support only certain of their children in their education or wishes to work away from the family in cities. Attention to an infant's vulnerability may be viewed as part of a young mother's drive to improve her status within her husband's family and establish her own household. It is also a way for daughters-in-law to manage the ambiguous status which they sustain as individuals.

The sense of anxiety about integration, which forges parent–child relations, is not restricted to infants alone. It reveals a paradox which people face at different periods in their lives. The fluid, transient, and undetermined character of young infants manifests a particular way of being that people confront at different life stages. Not reducible to the exigencies of being either an infant or a daughter-in-law, then, a 'child-like' (*hüühed shig*) status where boundaries between insiders and outsiders are blurred and hazy is not something confined to childhood. It epitomizes the tenuous and ambiguous quality of integrating oneself throughout later life, including the Buriad's own position as outsiders in Mongolia—both geographically distant from the capital and urban centres and as an ethnic minority. In relation to this, Hamayon (1990) has drawn an analogy between the shaman and the hunter as interstitial kinds of people who traverse boundaries of various kinds (see also Humphrey 1995). I would like to add the infant and the affine to this mode (Delaplace and Empson 2007). They may be viewed as people who traverse the borders between that which is visible and that which is invisible,

or between different networks of kin. In saying this, it is important to stress that an affinal status, female gender, and being child-like, are not lifelong states.[28] Rather, they should be viewed as modes of being that characterize particular relations and moments in one's life when the boundaries between who is and who is not part of a household/district/country become unclear.

The value of separation

Practices that separate mothers from a potential metamorphosis into infants and infants from spirits allow for the formation of singular and more stable bodies (Vilaça 2005). We have seen that it is held to be necessary to detach oneself from the physical intensity of umbilical relations based on shared blood. Equally, we have seen the need to detach oneself from pollution that comes from outside and women from their husband's kin. By creating a physical distance and by giving a part of oneself away, a liveable version of the relation is formed. It is because of this that, when people are physically separated from each other, a part is often produced during the act of separation. This part is carefully retained in order to maintain the relation in a separated form. Containing a part of a person's body, be that the umbilical cord, a piece of hair, or the placenta, can be viewed in relation to the practice of harnessing fortune in three distinct ways.

First, by containing a piece of hair from the child's first hair-cutting ceremony, parents separate off and contain a part of their child at a point at which they are introduced to their kin. By retention of some of this hair, children are formally bound to 'relations of bone'. Secondly, in retaining a piece of the umbilical cord at their natal home, relations are maintained between a woman and her children and between siblings, all of whom may later disperse. It allows women, who are never fully placed in their father's or husband's family, to maintain a partial connection with their natal home. This is exemplified in the term used for a bride as a 'person with an umbilical cord and an engagement' (*hüütei-süütei hün*), indicating that she is someone who is about to move to her husband's family, but still has continued relations with her natal home. It allows her children, who ultimately belong to her husband's family, to maintain a lasting tie of relatedness with their mother and their siblings which transcends their actual physical location (*hüi tatah*, lit. tugging at the umbilical cord).

[28] In this sense, we see that maleness (such as the hearth which is passed between men) can include femaleness (see Humphrey and Onon 1996:170–1; and Chapter 7 below).

Although people may be physically separated, due to the intense aspect of these relations, people do draw upon them at different times.[29] For example, after having experienced a series of miscarriages, Tsendmaa explained to me that she drew on her natal family fortune by making offerings to their sacred tree (Bur. *hairhan mod*). In such a way, we see that the umbilical cord is both an actual part of a person achieved through separation and an expression of a relation that, through separation, can reappear: its containment is achieved through departure, but it remains in order to allow for the possibility of return. Umbilical relations also allow mothers, birth assistants, siblings, and actual places in the landscape to maintain connections which span horizontally across vertical lines of shared bone. I am not suggesting that this idiom of relatedness is a strategy on behalf of incoming women to go beyond ties based on descent.[30] Rather, if we focus on the small interactions, feelings, emotions, and sentiments that shape what it means to be related in the course of daily life, we can grasp a more subtle understanding of the various layers, horizontal links, and twists of life which come to characterize people's relations. Thirdly, by retaining these pieces in her married house, a woman is able to solidify relations with her children even though she lives with her husband's family and is regarded as belonging to another group.[31] Women often use these pieces as magical remedies for their children and as an aid to fertility. They both protect a person in a situation of crisis and facilitate the possibility of future kin. By carefully hoarding a piece of the umbilical cord or pieces of the child's first hair in the family chest, the mother–child relationship (*eh üriin holboo*) is maintained as a possible connection, regardless of people's physical location.

Through focus on objects contained inside the household chest, we see that certain aspects of people's relations are safely contained and hidden from view, precisely because they are created when that part of a person, determined by gender and birth-order, separates, moves, and transforms. The

[29] The umbilical cord stands for a child's life-power or soul (*süns*), and the loss of their first hair at the hair-cutting ceremony represents the incorporation of a child into the world of people (Galdanova 1992). See also Humphrey (1973: 22): 'Buriat women preserve the umbilical cords of the children, since it is thought that the cord is somehow a "line of life" whose magic power would be broken if the cord were to be thrown away. [It is] associated by the Buriat with female descent and thought of as complementary to patrilineal essence.'

[30] For discussions of Wolf's concept of 'uterine family strategies' see Stafford (1995: 141; 2000a: 51; 2000b: 123–4).

[31] In their capacity to generate and contain fortune, daughters-in-law are a necessary part of their husband's kin. They stand in for and substitute the loss of fortune generated through the departure of their in-laws' daughters and the movement of men between the forest and domestic encampment.

contained and hidden pieces are the traces of relations that are concealed from general view and are not displayed openly in daily life or through communal rituals.[32] It is worth noting that the practice of removing a body part or taking a particular artefact at moments of transformation is also present in Mongolian rituals of death. Here, the giving away of the dying person's belongings severs relations with the living in an acceptable way. By giving away their belongings, the dying person effectively breaks their attachment to them and frees their soul so that they may be reborn (see Humphrey 1999, 2002a). Humphrey explains that the 'spirit or "soul" (*süns*), even after death, remains emotionally attached to one particular object [*horgodoson yüm*] which was much used in the person's lifetime' (2002a: 67). The verb '*horgodoh*' means to long for something (an object, a place, an animal, or a person), to take shelter in it, and be unwilling to leave it (Humphrey 2002a: 67). Infants do not require the normal protocol of funerary rituals to ensure the soul will not return to retrieve their possessions. Their souls have not found secure shelter in their bodies. If an infant dies before the age of one or so, its body may be placed in the forest. (Chabros 1988: 32 uses the term '*hüüühed geeh*' for the body of a dead baby being 'lost' in the forest.) Parents ask a male member of the household (or the mother's brother) to strap the deceased's body lightly on to the back of his horse as he gallops furiously into the forest. Once the body has fallen off, people must never look back at or visit the site for several years in order to ensure the soul quickly finds a new body to inhabit (see also Chapter 5). In this way, death is an extreme kind of separation that people have to manage in relation to ideas about the separation or containment of things. But it is not just at death that 'detachment from a person [is] achieved by giving something [of oneself] to them' (Humphrey 2002a: 71). We have seen that living people also practise this form of detachment. Movement away from the house, in marriage for example, demands that people are separated on the condition that a piece of them is kept back.

Parts, hidden inside the chest, like incoming women to the household, provide a vessel or container that gathers location-less connections. These vessels are the outcome of relations that are volatile and uncertain, but they

[32] The concept of revealing and concealing different aspects of people's relations can, of course, be extended outwards. A case in point would be restrictions placed on the daughter-in-law in terms of language. Uttering personal names in Mongolia draws attention to the hierarchical relationship between the speaker and the person the name refers to. It is taboo for a daughter-in-law to speak the names of senior male affines and she must find suitable substitute words to refer to them, even in their absence. For further information concerning name taboos and the suppression of attention, see Humphrey (1993, 2006a).

anchor people in relations that transcend a person's physical location and form. Traversing relations that are located in visible sites according to agnatic connections based on shared bone, hidden things obtained through separation allow for people to remain attached to each other in spite of their separations. It is important to stress that these parts do not simply contain or stand for relations, but actively create and facilitate them. Relations based on separations and departures are necessary for sustaining the visibly enacted relations based on the chest's surface. In turn, it is important to note that things contained in the bottom of chests are not about a sense of 'possession'. Although they are highly valued, they are intrinsically tied to their original producer and cannot be used in exchange for something else (Weiner 1992). They become material parts through movement and transformation and, in so doing, create a lasting connection to the person they were once attached to. The thing is never a full replication or replacement of the person, but a part that is necessarily different from its original form.[33] When viewing familial relations through these things, we make what is considered the periphery the centre. By keeping and retaining such pieces, an anticipated return to a possible version of the relationship is created (Weiner 1985: 221).

Although these things could be viewed as icons, in that they are held to contain some part of a person in their absence, they are not passed on over generations. Instead, we have seen that they preserve the possibility of current relations between living people. Because they cannot be exchanged or substituted for another form, they could be viewed as 'hyper-personal objects' (Humphrey 2002a), in that they have a hyper-identification with the person they belonged to (or have been detached from). The spirit or soul of a person may be attached to such an object and they have to be looked after with care. When people move away from the household, these pieces (either an umbilical cord or a piece of hair) are retained at the moment of transition, and kept back by the people who remain. Once separated, they are carefully cared for by someone else, in part because they provide vessels that harness and accumulate fortune for the whole family. Growth is thus achieved outside of the thing itself, whether this be the placenta buried in the ground, or the umbilical cords and pieces of hair contained inside the chest. We have seen that material objects, such as dresses and cots, are also held to contain some element of fortune that will affect those who engage

[33] The idea that things originating from one source are similar, but not the same as each other, could be applied to naming practices in Mongolia. It is not uncommon for children of one household to share a name that has a similar part but a different ending, e.g. *Bibish* (Not-me) and *Tërbish* (Not-them), or *Batchimeg* (Bold-decoration) and *Battsetseg* (Bold-flower). Here, a part of the name is shared, but it is modified according to different people.

with them. In this way, fortune appears to reside in things that have to be carefully managed in order that fortune is circulated within the confines of a household. Loaning this kind of object to others is, of course, not without risks. Fortune may be stolen, or the object could become polluted through further use. Managing the circulation of these objects is to create boundaries between those who may benefit from them and those who may not.

Instead of merging relations between people into groups and then making them visibly static, as with photographic montages, the pieces that I have described as being buried in the household chest serve to separate bodies and create a new link with the person they were detached from. Through their extraction, liveable relations come into existence. Having used the concept of fortune to explore artefacts in and around the household chest, certain ideas emerge about personhood. It has been suggested that relations based on household networks are visibly foregrounded as immobile centres from which people reach out to different connections with other groups. Such relations are, however, dependent on the separation and incorporation of others; relations from which one must be separated, in order to support the possible growth of this centre, are concealed from general view.