REPRODUCING PEOPLE AND PROPHECY IN MONGOLIA

REBECCA EMPSON

In this presentation I describe two kinds of reproduction that appear in very different areas of my work. The examples are brought together here in order to explore ideas about the recursive yet transmutative aspects of reproduction. The theme of 'rupture' or 'calamity' and the idea of harnessing reproduction for political means run through both of them. The first example, that of intra-kin rebirths, is concerned with reproducing the past and centres on ideas about *loss*. The second example is that of prophecy and is concerned with reproducing a particular knowledge about the future when other forms of explanation are *lacking*. Both examples draw attention to the divergence between expectation and experience. The material is drawn from my fieldwork along the northern Mongolian-Russian border, among a group of Mongolian people called the Buryat.

Reproducing people

A sense of absence, of being separated from some place or person, grips many levels of Buryat kinship. Primarily, there is a sense of absence from place, as the Buryats fled war in their homeland in Russian Buryatia and migrated to Mongolia in the early 1900s. In Mongolia, the Buryats were heavily persecuted during the socialist period, to such an extent that almost all the male members of the community were taken away or killed. Expressions of difference, such as the Buryat practice of recording family genealogies and the use of surnames, were thought to be politically polluting and representative of a kind of history that had to be erased for the socialist world to come into being. Notwithstanding this separation or 'rupture' from place and people, the Buryats in Mongolia *can* be united with the people and places that they have been separated from. One of the ways in which they achieve this is through the idea of intra-kin rebirths. Here, kin members' bodies become the receptacles of deceased relatives' souls. Such rebirths are usually recognised at birth when parents search their child's body for a birthmark that indicates who the child is a rebirth of. But rebirths are not solely apprehended through indices of markings on a child's body. As a

young child starts to speak and move about in the world, certain characteristics, stories of extraordinary experiences, idiosyncratic mannerisms and physical characteristics become recognisable to family members alerting them that a relative has been reborn (c.f. Empson 2006a).

Acknowledging the rebirth of a deceased kin member is often something parents and elders cherish. It allows for relations with the deceased, and especially those who have experienced untimely deaths, to continue after their physical death. In such a way, recognising intra-kin rebirths also allows for the recollection of personal memories of people that are not present in dominant historical narratives. Nevertheless, recognising a rebirth can also be a point of contention and something that one only tentatively mentions to others. This is because acknowledging the rebirth of a relative can be challenged when different perspectives inscribe very different subjects. For example, there is often a difference between who the mother and the father think that a child is a rebirth of. In the case of a woman, claiming that her son's child is a part of her own genealogy can be seen to undercut agnatic relations. A woman explained to me that her grandson was the reincarnation of her deceased brother, but she had not mentioned this to anyone because her husband had told her that the child was probably the rebirth of his deceased mother. Keeping this knowledge to herself, she was able to maintain a close connection with her brother, even though she lived with her husband's kin. We can begin to see here that intra-kin rebirths are not simply about people infinitely replicating themselves in each other. Instead, acknowledging a rebirth foregrounds a relationship to a severed past and provides a way in which people are able to maintain very individual relations with people in a new form.

While this may be one aspect of rebirths in this area, implicit in the acknowledgment of a rebirth is a strong notion of ownership over people. I have suggested that a person may be held to be a different rebirth by different people. In these cases, people may relate to a given person in very different ways. Furthermore, acknowledging a rebirth does not determine every way in which people relate to that person. For example, it is very rare that a person will be given the name of their rebirth and people do not claim that they have no children because their child is, for example, the rebirth of their grandfather. Instead, it seems that attending to a person in their reincarnated form involves a particular type of perspective, as a single person may be one of several people, depending on different family members' points of view. It is in this sense that we can talk about recognising rebirths as a form of ownership. Because a rebirth can only be made visible through another's

recollection, that person is very much the author or creation of the person who attends to them. In this way, rebirths become a way of anchoring a person in relation to oneself. Instead of people acting as vessels by which deceased kin members can be reproduced in the living, I suggest that rebirths work as channels which allow people to continue very intimate relations with the deceased. In line with this, intra-kin rebirths can be said to allow for any number of possible reproductions in a single bodily form.

Reproducing prophecy

I turn now to present some collaborative research that I have been working on concerned with prophecy in Mongolia. In contrast to the previous example, we will see that each time something is reproduced, it changes its form. I should make it clear that prophecy is here distinguished from other forms of supernatural prognostication, such as divination or astrology. This is because, in Mongolia, prophetic pronouncements tend to appeal to a distinctly wide frame of reference, which often encompasses notions of 'society', 'the nation', and 'the people'. Furthermore, although many Mongolian prophecies are characterized by ambiguity and equivocation, their rightful interpretation is held to reveal a truth about the world that is *ahead* of other explanatory forms. If some people claim that the world is known by 'science', for others this means that science cannot be opposed to the kind of knowledge that is predicted in prophecy. Indeed, prophecy can be viewed as a kind of 'hyper-science' that reveals what scientific thought has yet to establish (Humphrey 2006). In line with this, it is not surprising to find that prophetic knowledge has frequently been used to support different political agendas in Mongolia.

Before I present some of the material, a few words must be said about prophecy as a distinct type of language that produces particular temporal effects. As mentioned, prophecies in the Mongolian cultural region are generally characterised by indirect messages that conceal what exactly it is that they are referring to. The multivocal messages of these prophecies mean that, in order to locate their meaning interpretative work has to be done on behalf of people who hear or read them. When an interpretative match between a prediction and an actual event fits, the prophecy is held to be unequivocally correct and the original person who uttered the prophecy is revealed as someone who knew, all along, what was going to happen; it just took some time for the right interpretation to emerge. If we examine the temporality of this process more closely, we see that the production and reproduction of prophetic knowledge turns on a radical reformulation of ideas about

truth. I have suggested that the time-lapse characteristic of most prophecies before they find a secure match, allows for prophetic knowledge to be attributed to a range of possible events. Here, prophecy is open to multiple interpretations that are either *right* or *wrong*. When a consensus has been reached as to a single interpretation, prophecy loses its form as prophecy and becomes a story. When a prophecy becomes a story, we find ourselves in the belated time of narrative, the time when the match has been found and the search is over (cf. Wood 2003). At this moment, we say that the prophecy has been *fulfilled*, or in the case of Mongolia, that it has 'hit the target'.

The idea that prophecies have to be fulfilled in order for people to see *how* they are true is one of the concerns of the material I am going to present. I shall focus on how people continue to search for an interpretative match to a well-known prophetic concept, referred to in Mongolian as 'the time of great calamities' (*tsövüün tsag*). Usually 'the time of great calamities' is viewed as an apocalyptic period of great insecurity and moral decline that will happen sometime in the distant future. Several Mongolian prophecies predict that the world will be thrown into a terrible war and calamities, such as natural disasters, floods, epidemics and widespread death, will permeate every aspect of people's lives. After this period, the Buddhist god Maitreya will appear on Earth and herald the dawn of a new era or epoch. While people generally anticipate that this will happen in the future, diverse events and experiences have, at different historical periods, been thought to be indicators that this time has commenced. In this way, 'the time of great calamities' is not simply a cosmological idea that refers to a distant future. This concept has been brought forth in very different ways to apply to the present. I will explore how people have brought this known future narrative to life in relation to changing practices and experiences. It will be suggested that, while prophecy may be repeatedly propelled forward, in an *extreme* way, during crises or intense social change, because 'the time of great calamities' never fully finds its interpretative match, it persists.

Evocations of the future

Throughout the Mongolian cultural region 'the time of great calamities' has been brought forth in various guises and forms in response to different politico-historical contexts (cf. Humphrey 2003: 189). I present some examples. In the late nineteenth century, the reincarnated ruler of Mongolia issued several prophetic edicts warning the public of signs that 'the time of great calamities' was about to commence (cf. Bawden 1968). In the early 1930s, the concept of 'the time of great calamities'

appeared again when counter-revolutionaries spread oral prophecies identifying socialist reforms with signs that 'the time of great calamities' was approaching (cf. Bawden 1968). But appeal to prophecy has not always been used to counter or validate political reform. We can find traces that the language of prophecy, and the idea of an approaching apocalyptic epoch, was present in a very different form in the 1980s (cf. Humphrey 1994). Here, prophecy was not used by political elites to generate social change or validate power. Instead, reference to 'the time of great calamities' emerged among lay-people as a response to feelings of moral uncertainty and suspicion (cf. Humphrey 1994). Recently, ideas concerning the possible approach of 'the time of great calamities' have resurfaced in reaction to new fears, such as the privatisation of land, mining, diseases such as SARS, and Mongolia's growing economic dependence on China. People from herders to taxi drivers and academics discuss whether they are being propelled into this anticipated future as they search for signs that 'the time of great calamities' might have begun. Because this prophecy failed to fully materialise in the past, people claim that new events and experiences might be indicators that it has started in the present. When this prophecy is signaled by current experiences, a difference emerges between 'the time of great calamities' as an abstract concept (referring to the distant future) and current manifestations of this concept in relation to events in the present.

In order to show how people reproduce this prophecy to fit with current concerns, I present a brief ethnographic example from a small district on the Mongolian-Russian Border, which I shall call Tsegeen. Here 'the time of great calamities' was almost realised. Firstly, in the summer of 2002, a neighbouring district who were experiencing a drought were rumoured to have used a method, locally referred to as 'shooting the clouds with cannons', in order to generate rain. That winter, Tsegeen district experienced unexpected weather conditions resulting in a lot of snow. The severe weather was interpreted by some as a possible sign that 'the time of great calamities' might have commenced. But it was not just the impact of the severe winter that was held to be a sign that this period was imminent. Reflecting on past events, people came to the conclusion that the neighbouring district's actions of 'shooting the clouds' had caused an abundance of rain clouds that had caused the heavy snowfall. Together, the actions of the neighbouring district and the ensuing consequences were interpreted as a sign that 'the time of great calamities' might have begun. In the spring of 2003, 'the time of great calamities' was still thought to be materialising as dust storms and droughts inflicted the district. Again, people reflected on other events that may have caused this outcome and

concluded that tremors, generated by explosions from the Iraqi war, were spreading over the Earth, changing the soil and causing dust storms and droughts. Finally, in the late spring, extensive forest fires swept through the district. Together, all of these events were thought to be signs that 'the time of great calamities' had started. Yet, by mid-summer of that year, the idea that 'the time of great calamities' had started seemed to have disappeared and a return to the previous idea, that 'the time of great calamities' was something in the distant future, was restored, albeit in a slightly different way. A woman commented in passing: 'In the winter it was a little bit "the time of great calamities", but things are better now.'

Prophetic time as repeatable trope

From these short summaries of different examples we can see that 'the time of great calamities' is a concept that has allowed for diverse interpretations of the present. Using the ethnographic example concerning 'generating rain clouds' as an analogy, we can see how this prophecy allows for continuously changing understandings of the present. With the example of the rain clouds, the desired outcome was known (i.e. people in one district wanted rain). But the actual outcome meant that only part of the rain fell in the right place, and the rest materialised later in a different place altogether. With the concept of 'the time of great calamities' the outcome is usually believed to occur sometime in the distant future. But the actual outcome is that 'the time of great calamities' is reproduced in different forms in the present. These different forms allow for the prophecy to constantly change as it moves forward in time. While the idea that a 'time of great calamities' is approaching has remained the same, the signs that indicate that this period might have commenced have changed. In such a way, people are able to identify new anticipations of the future through the reproduction of this concept.

We have also seen that this prophecy has ultimately failed in terms of its full disclosure (i.e. no time is the *actual* time of great calamities). I have suggested that this can be seen as a compelling reason why prophecy is repeatedly brought forth as a valid explanation in different periods. But maybe this problem, or failure of full realization, is in fact intrinsic to this concept? Because of the failure of 'the time of great calamities' to ever be fully realized, people are able to reproduce this concept of a 'known' future in relation to a constantly changing present. This allows for a widening of the range of possible associations to the concept, generating new meanings that are *more persuasive* than that of the original prophecy (cf. Wagner 1986). What appears, then, to be a

shattering, or failure of the prophecy each time it is marshalled as a feasible explanation for events and then disappears as a valid idea, is in fact a sign of its fertility to produce new meanings. We can begin to see here that 'the time of great calamities' allows for the reproduction of a particular trope that is transformed each time it is put to use. It is important to stress that when I say that prophecy becomes a particular kind of trope, I am not suggesting that 'the time of great calamities' is simply a concept that reduces all experiences to the same thing. Instead, when this prophecy is used, it forces new interpretations of the present that go beyond its original prediction. One of the effects of prophecy, then, is that it repeatedly reveals a future that extends beyond people's initial expectation.

But prophecy is not simply a fertile tool by which people are able to understand social change. The search for and labelling of events to a known prophetic period is also due to the fact that people feel certain specialists know about the future but conceal this knowledge from the general public. Religious specialists and politicians enforce the view that knowledge about the future is being kept secret. They often comment that they do know some prophecies, but that it is not the right time to reveal their interpretations of them. The idea that it is not the 'right time' to reveal an interpretation is embedded in the idea that widespread knowledge about these things can somehow initiate and assist in their fulfillment. This is exemplified in a more general fear that if prophetic knowledge were to get 'into the wrong hands', bad things could happen. Lay-interpretations of 'the time of great calamities' can be viewed as attempts to identify, or approximate this known future. Here, prophecy could be seen as a critique of more regular means of understanding (i.e. it signals that these other explanations are lacking). But people do not just turn to prophecy as a form of critique (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002). In Mongolia, people also turn to prophetic explanations because these ways of thinking promise to reveal knowledge about the world that is ordinarily concealed.

Concluding remarks

I should like to end this presentation by pointing out some very general ideas about the material I have presented. When trying to understand what is being reproduced, in both of these examples, I have found it helpful to distinguish between the 'concept' (of the person or prophecy) and the 'form' it takes when it is reproduced. In the case of intra-kin rebirths, people are viewed as replications of deceased kin members. Here, reproductions of past people may be multiple and varied depending on whose perspective we take, but they always appear

through a single bodily form. In contrast, what is being reproduced in the case of prophecy is a single concept that is put to use in varied ways so that it always appears in a very different form. In such a way, prophecy allows for the retranslation of a 'known' future as we move forward in time. Both of these examples have suggested that the need to reveal a reproduction stems from the need to alter regular ideas about temporality. The idea of replicating a known concept and altering it to fit with present concerns is used in each of the two cases to recast the past as well as the future. In so doing, they provide a way of revealing a continuity that may ordinarily be concealed.

Acknowledgements:

I thank Monica Konrad for organising this event and for allowing me the opportunity to present my work in an inter-disciplinary context. Her own work on prophecy is, of course, an inspiration. I also acknowledge the generous support of the British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Award (PDF/2003/145) that has allowed me to expand on some of these ideas.

References

Bawden, C. R. 1968. *The Modern History of Mongolia.* Asia-Africa Series of Modern Histories (ed. Bernard Lewis). London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson

Empson, Rebecca. 2006a. No Body, No Memory? The body of the other as a site for recalling and re-inscribing kin in Mongolia. In *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness* by Janet Carsten (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publications (forthcoming)

Empson, Rebecca (ed.). 2006b. *Visions of the Future: Time, Causality and Prophecy in the Mongolian Cultural Region.* London: Global Oriental (forthcoming)

Humphrey, Caroline. 1994. Remembering an 'Enemy': The Bogd Khaan in Twentieth-Century Mongolia. In *Memory, History, and Opposition Under Sate Socialism* by Rubie S. Watson (ed.), Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press

Humphrey, Caroline. 2003. Stalin and the Blue Elephant: Paranoia and Complicity in Post-Communist Metahistories. In *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* by Harry G. West and Todd Sanders (eds.), Durham and London: Duke University Press

Humphrey, Caroline. 2006. The President and the Seer: A Case Study of Prophecy and Scientific Attitudes in Modern Political Life. In *Visions of the Future: time, causality and prophecy in the Mongolian Cultural Region* by Rebecca Empson (ed.), forthcoming

Navaro-Yashin, Yael. 2002. *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press

Wagner, Roy. 1986. *Symbols that Stand For Themselves*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Wood, Michael. 2003. *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux Press

Rebecca Empson
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Cambridge