

# **Dangerous Fortunes:**

**An anthropological study of the Mongolian Informal Gold Mining Economy**



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Since ninja mining is not a legal activity in Mongolia, the identity of individual ninjas is in this book protected through the use of pseudonyms. In order to avoid revealing the faces of ninjas, they are also only portrayed through drawings and distant photos. All drawings are made by Britta Sørensen.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Dangerous fortunes

This book considers how gendered hierarchies and local cosmologies relate to the emergence of a transitional economy in rural Mongolia. Instead of approaching diverse economic spheres as isolated and incongruent, I focus on the tense, yet mutually constitutive relationship between informal sector gold mining and nomadic pastoralism. By examining the ways in which local herders of the largest ethnic group (Halh) relate to and take part in the gold rush currently taking place in Mongolia, I demonstrate how the physical proximity of the mines to herding households has given rise to numerous economic, social and spiritual-religious ties. By approaching economic practices as integral to many aspects of everyday life, I suggest that attention to the dynamic interrelationship between multiple local economies allows for a better understanding of the interests and motivations underpinning people's involvement in new labour regimes. That is, by attending to people's economic practices, this book is centrally concerned with the production and negotiation of local socialities at a time of drastic socio-economic change.

Since this study concerns practices that are considered 'new' by the people with whom I carried out fieldwork, I find it important to retain a historical perspective. By using historical material, my intention is to identify both the enduring and changing character of particular practices. Instead of construing new practices as generalised reactions to the ruptures of modernity or the bewilderments of globalisation, a combination of historical perspective and local ethnography ensures a temporally and regionally specific analytical focus. Moreover, by appreciating the historicity of contemporary practices and beliefs, parameters for understanding 'novelty' are maintained which allow a better understanding of the local significance of Mongolia's emerging gold mining economy.

The book argues that the particular kind of wealth in gold from the mines is distinct from the pastoral wealth of local herders. In general, the production of wealth is related to a person's specialised knowledge of a craft and his or her ability to attract the 'fortune' or 'blessing' (*hishig*) of local spirits. However, since the act of mining is surrounded by fundamental taboos related to the land, involvement in the emerging gold mining economy challenges local conceptualisations of the landscape (*baigal*) and its numerous invisible entities, which identify the household as the primary unit for spiritual-religious interactions. As miners forge new ties with spirits, they thus assert

autonomy vis-à-vis the hierarchies of both spirits and kinsmen. I suggest that, by working in the mines, people distance themselves from the patriarchal relations of kinship and affinity that characterise local herding households. Indeed, gold mining allows for participation in an alternative subsistence economy, involving a form of sociality that accommodates and even demands the relative autonomy of individual miners. As miners return to herding households on the steppe, their association with dangerous fortunes and angry spirits renders them feared guests who bring misfortune onto the hosting household. Engaging in social drinking practices that hinge on obligatory generosity central to Mongolian notions of personhood, visiting miners affirm the moral position of herding relations over those formed in the mines. Seeking the fortunes of gold thus becomes a socially and cosmologically dangerous, even if materially rewarding, endeavour. In considering how people situate themselves morally in relation to a landscape that is undergoing drastic transformations fuelled by global economic processes, this book contributes to current debates on power, industrialisation and the moral implications of emerging economic practices within particular socio-cultural contexts.

### **The conditions of fieldwork**

Ever since I first visited Mongolia, mining has been part of the reason for my visit. In 2000 I worked as an intern for the International Labour Organisation (ILO-IPEC) in the country and part of my job was to monitor development projects carried out in coal mining towns near the capital of Ulaanbaatar. It was at this time that I became aware of the national importance of mining, its social and environmental costs and its potential longevity. Yet, what caught my attention most were the frequent remarks made by the miners about how they feared local spirits, angered by the mining activities. The issue of mining was more intriguing and perplexing than I had first thought. Over the years, mining has emerged as the most important economic sector in Mongolia and as the current gold rush developed, I had found my area of interest.

This book is based primarily on twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork in Central Mongolia, carried out from January to October in 2005 and January to October in 2006. In the beginning I spent two months in Ulaanbaatar, studying Mongolian language and researching the formal and informal mining sectors. During these initial months, I worked as a volunteer for a non-governmental organisation (*Aziin San*) and a local advocacy group (*Ongiin Golynhan*), established to generate awareness of the implications of mining along the river Ong. As my friendships with the members of the Ong River Movement deepened, they invited my husband Casey and I along on field trips. Travelling from South Gobi to the Hangai mountains, we surveyed the environmental



impacts of mining over several hundred kilometres and interviewed countless people about the pressing issues that mining raised. Upon seeing the unmatched concentration of informal sector miners at the head of the Ong river in the North-Western part of the Övörhangai region in a district (*sum*) called Uyanga, I decided that this was to be the place for my fieldwork.

In Uyanga I carried out fieldwork on the steppe as well as in the mines. On the steppe I stayed with two host families, living ‘three mountain ranges apart’, yet with equal distance to the mining areas. Whilst both herding families are proud and wealthy herders, they have taken radically different stances vis-à-vis the advent of informal sector mining. Whereas one family is very involved in the local mining, the other purposefully delimits any such involvement. In both my host families, my assumptions about an ‘egalitarian’ ethos, described in the regional literature as the near hallmark of Mongolian nomadic pastoralism, were profoundly challenged. Instead, as will become apparent in the following chapters, my hosts were centrally implicated in patriarchal household structures. Whilst that meant learning about submission and displays of respect, it also provided me with an explicit kin position and social role within my host families as an unmarried daughter<sup>1</sup>.

In the mines, my fieldwork was of a rather different nature. Following primarily the kin and affinal ties of my host families on the steppe, my husband and I stayed with three unrelated mining families for a total period of two months. Whereas my herding families live in a sparsely populated mountainous region, the population of several thousand miners is concentrated in just a few valleys. With people living right up against each other, most of our interactions did not take place within isolated household groups, but rather with the friends and relatives of our *ninja* hosts. The term ‘ninja’ (*ninja*) refers to informal sector gold miners who do not have licences for the areas where they mine, and I refer interchangeably to miners and ninjas throughout this book<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately my concerted period of fieldwork in the mines was shortened due to unforeseen circumstances. However, given the social intensity of mining life and the physical proximity of its population, I do not feel that my data has been significantly compromised. This is also due to the fact that the stark physical distinction between the pot-holed, grey landscape of the mines and the vast green steppe land is not matched by a similar exclusive social and economic division between herders and miners. Indeed, many people partake in both herding and mining, and it was from such people that I

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<sup>1</sup> Although the families had met my husband, I spent most of my time in the field alone.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘ninja’ is commonly used by the miners themselves, the general population and government officials. Apparently the term arose from the miners’ appearance when carrying the customary green plastic pan tied to their back, reminiscent of the television cartoon series called the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Grayson 2006:37). Although ninjas mine for gold without possessing the legally required mining license, thereby evading state regulation with

also learnt about mining whilst residing on the steppe. As a result, my research into herding and mining was not entirely dependent on my own physical location.

Apart from fieldwork with herders and miners, I also stayed for a few weeks with local Buddhist lamas in the administrative centre of the district (*sumyn töv*, referred to as ‘the village’). The village has an estimated population of five thousand people and also houses Uyanga monastery (*Uyangiin hiid*), the local school, a basic hospital, local government offices and small shops. During my stay with the lamas, I was able to see and discuss the different concerns of and interactions between herders, miners and the religious specialists.

To accommodate language barriers I conducted and recorded interviews with my research assistant for two weeks in 2005 and 2006. We interviewed elder herders, schoolteachers, medical doctors, Buddhist lamas, district politicians and shopkeepers. My aim was to destabilise a narrow and circumscribed focus on miners and herders only, and get a better idea of the extent to which the recent gold mining activities have affected the district. To complement my data from Uyanga, I have also carried out archival research in the GeoFund (the national archive for geological data) in Ulaanbaatar, where I was particularly interested in the history of geological exploration in Uyanga. I have also collected and researched newspaper articles published in Mongolian and English language newspapers from 1997 up to the present day concerning formal and informal sector mining.

As my informants generally speak Mongolian only, I experienced fieldwork as an extended and intense language-learning situation. Living together with my host families in their *gers*, I rarely had any privacy or autonomy. Mongolian language was spoken throughout the day and I was expected to take part in daily life as a regular member of the household, ranging from milking yaks in the morning to hosting drunken visitors at night. Whereas my host families seemed reluctant to accommodate my initially poor language skills by slightly altering the speed and content of their utterances, my sisters in my second host family on the steppe willingly repeated statements I did not understand. As my language skills and herding competence slowly improved, the host families increasingly incorporated me into their households. Referring to me with appropriate kin terms, I became part of their status hierarchy, occupying a low status position within the household. Yet, outside the household I enjoyed a peculiar high status position as a foreigner and was invited to meetings with regional politicians, the weddings of strangers and was always subject to much local

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regards to taxation, environmental rehabilitation and land entitlement, ninjas do not generally consider their activities to

gossip and interest. Whilst I enjoyed the ready acceptance of my host families, I also had to accept the implicit restrictions and checks on my behaviour. I was not able to go wherever I wanted at any time I saw fit. I was also not able to talk to whomever I preferred as such behaviour would be considered disrespectful to my host father and his household. The data I collected during fieldwork is therefore primarily based on casual conversations that I jotted down in my notebook once a day. Also, most of these conversations were with family members or visitors to my host families since independent research trips were almost impossible.

Since there is much drunken aggression and physical danger in the mining areas, safety issues strongly informed the way in which I carried out my fieldwork in both the herding and mining areas. It was only during my husband's visits that I stayed in the mining areas and I was always accompanied by him as I went about my chores. As ninjas interacted with him alone or with the two of us, I was allowed insights into male interactions and learnt much from his questions and thoughts about local life in the mines. As I had to ensure that people did not associate me with the police, the government or any other formal trans-local organisation, I could not make use of research assistants or carry out recorded interviews in the mining areas. Accepting such compromises, I prioritised instead our participation in and observation of daily work-related tasks and domestic chores. Working and relaxing alongside miners, I engaged in much informal, casual conversation with numerous people whose statements I wrote up at the end of each day. Since I used the same technique in the herding areas, I do not feel the absence of recordings impoverished my data significantly. To the contrary, I have found that the use of recording equipment in general alters the quality of the data by making the situation more akin to formal interactions with authorities, reminiscent of the socialist period. Whilst such connotations lend the situation much familiarity and recognised valued formality, they also risk inducing a particular kind of formalised and impersonal narrative that responds primarily to the heightened expectations of the situation rather than to the questions asked.

Aided by the flexible social boundaries between ninjas and herders, I was able to talk to and observe ninjas whilst in the herding areas and thereby minimise exposure to the physical dangers of the mines during much of my fieldwork. Furthermore, I made regular trips to the mining areas with one of my host brother to sell milk in the early mornings. These trips were always eventful and provided a different entry into the mines as I not only observed economic and other interactions between herders and miners, but indeed became part of them myself. Dressed in herder's clothes

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be illegal.

and affiliated with a herding family, miners were curious and interested in learning about me. These interactions made fieldwork in the mines much easier as people already knew members of my host family. Although such a role possibly protected me by allocating me a place within a larger network of relatives and friends, it might also have hampered interactions with people who considered themselves part of a different network. My positioning allowed me to engage with most people, yet I am aware that there remains a different story to be told, had fieldwork been carried out differently.

## **Mining in Mongolia**

In this section I will briefly introduce the history of mining in Mongolia and consider the economic and legal environment within which *ninja* mining developed. Emphasising the close relationship between the formal and informal mining sectors, I will show how the initial investor-friendly legislation and the poor technology used by Russian and Mongolian companies contributed to the emergence of an unprecedented Mongolian gold rush in 2000.

In 2004 I was talking to some of my Mongolian city-based friends who were suffering financial hardship. Having tried all kinds of jobs, the husband as a last resort left for the *ninja* mines. However, although he was meant to work in the mines for a couple of months, he returned to the city after only two weeks. Upon his return, he recounted endless stories of the horrible conditions under which people mined for gold. Hearing about the wild drinking and intense violence, his wife remarked: “In the old days people wouldn’t dig for gold. It was seen as bad. If you mined for gold, bad things would happen. But now many people mine for gold”. I asked her why and she replied: “I don’t know. I think people are just very poor. Life is difficult now”.

In Ulaanbaatar *ninja* mining is commonly regarded as an economic phenomenon driven by poverty and desperation. During informal chats with taxi drivers, government officials, mining entrepreneurs and other city-based Mongolians, I was repeatedly told that *ninja* mining involved not only accepting hard working conditions, but also turning your back to the nomadic pastoralist heritage of your country. Enduring the hardships of mining and transgressing fundamental taboos and practices related to the land, *ninja* mining was described as the last life line for the desperate poor. Although the current gold rush is depicted by advisors to the Mongolian government, including aid agencies such as the World Bank, as a “viable solution” to “the adverse effects of economic restructuring, which has resulted in job losses, inflation and declining real incomes” (World Bank 2004:ii), it is considered more a blemish, if not an embarrassment, to the general Mongolian urbanite. However, whilst conjuring up images of destitute miners, *ninja* mining also

raises broader questions about foreign mining companies, investor-friendly mineral laws, etc. Taken as a whole, ninja mining is not something Mongolians are proud of, even if it has become a viable source of income.

Prior to the foundation of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924, industry was very limited in terms of gross industrial output and number of industrial enterprises (Khashchuluun 2001:1). However, as the Soviet Union in 1920 reacted to an appeal from the Mongolian People's Party for assistance against threats from China (Atwood 2004:513), economic, military and political ties between Mongolia and the USSR were soon formalised. Central planning of the economy began in 1931 with the first attempt at a Five-Year Plan (1931-35). However, it proved unsuccessful due to unreasonably high production targets<sup>3</sup> and widespread resistance to the attempted forced collectivisation (Rosenberg 1981). Since many people chose to kill the animals themselves rather than handing them over to the regime, this period led to extensive losses of livestock. The Plan was thus already abandoned a year later in 1932.

In the early years of Soviet socialism in Mongolia, it became evident that some of the envisioned pillars of the industrialised economy could not be easily introduced in the country. The majority of the country's population worked in pastoralism and was reluctant to take up industrial work. As a result, in 1927 seventy-four percent of the slowly growing industrial workforce was foreign, predominantly coming from China and the Soviet Union<sup>4</sup> (Worden and Savada 1991:150). With regards to mining, it was particularly difficult to find Mongolian workers.

The only gold-mining concern, the Mongolore Mining Company, started by Mr. Victor van Grotte, to develop the enormous mineral wealth in Northern Mongolia, was obliged to import Chinese labour from 1,000 miles away, simply because the Mongols refused at any price to work in the mines (Montagu 1956:77).

A systematic nationwide mapping of Mongolia's geology commenced in 1960 and two years later Mongolia became a member of the centrally planned socialist trade organisation COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance). Gold deposits were documented in all regions of the country, amounting to more than three hundred identified locations (Janzen 2005:12). Foreign investors from socialist countries established mining companies and imported workers from

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<sup>3</sup> In 1940, for example, Stalin demanded Mongolia to increase its herd to 200 million head. It was at the time 26 million (Atwood 2004:516).

neighbouring countries to work alongside the growing Mongolian workforce. The mining industry was both the most profitable and heavily subsidised sector within the national economy during the socialist period from 1921 to 1991 (Khashchuluun 2001). Yet, according to today's politicians, herders and ninjas, the mining industry during the socialist period had apparently few, if any, informal sector workers.

In 1991 Mongolia severed its ties with the disintegrating Soviet Union and embarked on a rapid programme of privatisation and democratisation. Experiencing immediate difficulties, Mongolia underwent 'shock therapy' to stabilise the crashing economy (Rossabi 2005:45-62), which relied heavily on two sectors during its first decade of market reforms: pastoralism and mining.

The first Minerals Law was issued in 1994 and focused exclusively on formal sector mining. Addressing licensing, exploration and mining as well as limited environmental protection measures, the law provided a highly investor-friendly framework that laid the ground stone for the subsequent explosive growth in the Mongolian mining sector. Indeed, whilst global gold production grew by twenty-one percent between 1991 and 2001, Mongolia experienced a seventeen-fold growth during the same period (GFMS 2004:1). As the formal gold mining sector surged and led to dramatic increases in production, inefficient mechanised mining and processing systems were still used. The technical equipment was originally developed in the early 1930s in the USSR and was thus not only out-dated, but also intended for mineralogical conditions dissimilar to those of Mongolia. Consequently, much gold has effectively been lost by the Mongolian and Russian-owned mining companies. An authoritative report on Mongolian mining described it as follows:

The mining methods and gold washing technology of the mining companies has generally remained poor, and it is unusual for a wash plant to recover >60% of the gold. Once allowance is made for other gold 'left behind' (e.g. in side-walls, mine floor, overburden, etc.) then >50% of gold is estimated to have been 'left behind' (Mongolian Business Development Agency 2003:37).

Using such poor technology, the formal mining sector effectively provided rich and relatively accessible resources for ninja miners at the same rate as it generated its own gold output. As the formal mining sector grew in terms of investment, geographical expansion and gold production, the informal mining sector therefore grew accordingly. When droughts and disastrous weather

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<sup>4</sup> However, with the Sino-Soviet break in 1960, Chinese experts and manpower were expelled from Mongolia. "The loss of tens of thousands of labourers delayed the completion of numerous capital projects" (Kaser 1982:15).

conditions (*zud*) occurred between 1999 and 2002, the open placer mines (shallow alluvial deposits) were a logical haven, able to accommodate increasing numbers of people and new waves of migration.

Published government figures for 2002 suggested that there were about ten thousand informal miners in Mongolia. However, several reports considered this to be a significant underestimate. The International Labour Organisation released a report stating that it believed twenty percent of the total rural work force to be involved in *ninja* mining at the time, that is, around one hundred thousand people (International Labour Organisation 2004:1). Today the number is likely to have grown considerably. As the mined gold is sold along illegal channels, reputedly destined for China, and thus circumventing the current five percent royalty tax on gold, the Bank of Mongolia is losing much potential revenue from *ninja* mining. The formal sector alone produces a legal flow of around thirteen tons of pure gold per year, worth more than 390 million USD<sup>5</sup> (Mongolian Business Development Agency 2003:168). Given such production figures in a country with a gross domestic product (GDP) of less than three billion USD (World Bank 1 July 2007), the mining sector is at present the most important economic sector. Major income-generating minerals include coal, copper, fluorspar, gold, molybdenum, tin, uranium and zinc. Within a legal climate that remains favourable to investment<sup>6</sup>, mining is currently the fastest growing economic sector in the country, increasing its output by more than thirty-three percent per year (National Statistical Office of Mongolia 2006:203).

According to an international investor, the Mongolian mining legislation is today one of the most open mining and exploration laws in the world, with very little 'restrictive legislation' in terms of government involvement, tax structure and environmental rehabilitation (see also World Bank 2006). By 2003, 2595 exploration licenses were issued in Mongolia, covering forty million hectares, comprising twenty-six percent of the country<sup>7</sup> (Mineral Resources and Petroleum Authority of Mongolia). Given such magnitude of the formal and informal mining sectors, street protests, televised debates and emerging non-governmental organisations demonstrate against the government's attitude to mining. Whereas some, often younger, Mongolians support the growing internationalisation of the mining sector, others accuse politicians for selling Mongolia's mineral resources, thus destroying the cherished countryside without generating much public revenue. *Ninja*

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<sup>5</sup> The current gold price is record high. On 15 April 2008, the gold price was 932.88 USD per ounce (31.1 grams).

<sup>6</sup> Although the Minerals Law of Mongolia remains investor-friendly, the hurried imposition of a 68% windfall tax on gold and copper on 12 May 2006 reduced Mongolia's economic and political attraction to investors.

<sup>7</sup> Non-governmental holdings are concentrated in 7 companies, controlling 50% of the non-governmental owned licensed areas.

mining is much more than simply an economic phenomenon, both in terms of its motivation and importance. Approaching ninja mining as it is carried out in Uyanga, this book will demonstrate why local herders and miners do not simply consider the precious metal a fortune to be capitalised upon.

## **Emerging economies**

In order to better understand local conceptualisations of ninja mining, this book strives to unify the well-established notion of the ‘informal economy’ (Hart 1973) with the recent works by Roitman (2005) and Guyer (2004) on the encompassing ‘ethics of illegality’. Whilst the analytic term ‘informal economy’ has been accused of reifying oppositions between the state and the market, the regulated and the wild, I distance myself from such critiques by calling on frameworks that view formal and informal economies as forming part of a single configuration of exchange relationships. As such, my approach to the study of economic practices is not built on presumptions of enduring dichotomies, but rather on asymmetrical relations and their expanding encompassment.

In 1973 Keith Hart published a seminal article on the economic opportunities of labour migrants in urban Ghana. He showed the ingenuity with which people sought income from activities that were not regulated by the state rather than desperately awaiting wage jobs within the formal sector. Since many economists and other social scientists at the time gave privileged attention to economic practices that were subject to the state management of national economies, Hart criticised the common bureaucratic practice of labelling people who earned informal sector incomes as ‘unemployed’ or ‘underemployed’. Marginalised from national statistics and macro-economic models, such ‘reserve armies’ earned substantial incomes, whilst also achieving a profitability and flexibility that was impossible within the formal sector. As growing numbers of people earned informal sector incomes, producing ever increasing amounts of goods and services, Hart thus called for attention to all kinds of income flows: “When half of the urban labour force falls outside the organised labour market, how can we continue to be satisfied with indicators of economic performance which ignore their productive activities?” (Hart 1973:88). Since informal sector activities were not merely “insignificant omissions of a largely effective system of statistical monitoring” (Hart 1992:219), the often unpredictable and volatile sector became a cornerstone not



only in economics and international development practices (especially by the World Bank and ILO)<sup>8</sup>, but also in anthropological scholarship more generally.

However, twenty years after his original publication, Hart (1992) critically re-evaluated the notion of informal economy and acknowledged that he had implicitly reproduced “the cold war ideology of a frozen opposition between the state and the market” (ibid.:216). Mapped onto contemporary ideas about the dominant state versus wild market forces, the informal economy was seen to jostle the foundational pillars of states modelled on Keynesian macro-economics. Indeed, the informal economy was defined not by its capacities, but by its negative differences from the formal sector, such as “the absence of form” or “the lack of established regularity” (ibid.:217). Whereas form and formality, endowed by state bureaucracy, were recognised qualities of the formal sector, the informal sector had escaped a definition of its own. Given this analytical malleability, the notion of the informal economy was applied in contexts far removed from that of the labour migrants making a living in Accra<sup>9</sup>.

Recognising that the ‘informal’ describes the manner in which a product is produced and/or exchanged (Castells and Portes 1989:12), this book follows Hart in using the notion of informal economy to refer to economic activities that take place beyond the bureaucratic regulation of the state (Hart 1992:218). Instead of viewing the informal economy as necessarily reproducing questionable and temporally specific models of the state, I draw on recent anthropological approaches that consider how different scales of value are encompassed within a single cultural configuration of exchange relationships. That is, rather than splitting income flows into two mutually exclusive realms that compete for post-cold war political victories, asserting the dominance of either the state or the market, I propose an integrative approach to the study of highly diverse economic circuits. Whilst the notion of the informal economy is useful in retaining attention to local ideas about labour relations, production processes and individual agency, an encompassing model that integrates all income flows prevents reproducing the frozen oppositions that the informal economy has been accused of reflecting.

In her work on road bandits in the Chad Basin, Roitman (2005, 2006) demonstrates how ‘non-regulated economic exchanges’, which I define as informal, often involve the state as a key actor. Following decades of political volatility, economic instability and pressing poverty, gang-based

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<sup>8</sup> See Desmond McNeill (2004) for a detailed review of the application of the term within development economics.

<sup>9</sup> See Hart (1988:846) for a description of the various ways in which the notion of the informal economy has been applied.

road banditry supported by organised groups of officially unemployed soldiers has become extremely common in the area. However, the bandits do not primarily rely on violent methods of extraction, but cooperate closely with customs officials, governors and the police. Whilst these state employees provide fiscal formalisation, ensure practical protection and allow for the unofficial extraction of ‘taxes’, they receive in return generous ‘wages’ from the bandits. Indeed, the language of the bandits and the state officials is rooted in a shared register of officialdom and bureaucratic terminology. The ‘law of the government’ and the ‘law of the road’ are thus not viewed as opposed, but rather as mutually supportive and constitutive. Since “anything that can move a poor man from hunger and begging is licit” (Roitman 2006:262, spoken by informant), unregulated economic exchanges, whilst not considered legal, are nonetheless described locally as licit and legitimate. Given this ‘pluralisation of regulatory authority’, both the road bandits and the state partake in licit modes of governing the economy. Within such an ‘ethics of illegality’, the state and the market are brought into a direct and mutually constitutive relationship that is negotiated through informal economic exchanges. Rather than presuming informal sector economic activities as opposed to or divorced from the state, Roitman forcefully shows its direct implication and interest in sustaining unregulated economic exchanges. I thus contend that whilst the static opposition between state and market may reflect ideologies of the cold war era, the notion of the informal economy is not necessarily restricted to the same political project. By recognising the involvement of the state in informal economies across the world, it is time to move beyond a picture of frozen oppositions and allow for a more encompassing analytical model.

The work by Guyer (2004) on the historical logics of economic exchanges in Atlantic Africa provides one such model. Guyer not only demonstrates the involvement of the state in informal economic exchanges, but also views formal and informal economies as forming part of a single cultural configuration of monetary transactions<sup>10</sup>. This configuration rests on the recurring presence of “a specific *asymmetrical* form of transaction” (ibid.:22, emphasis in original) whereby people, goods and services are converted across multiple scales of value, allowing for the generation of marginal gains. Re-evaluating Bohannan’s (1955, 1959) classic ethnography on the impact of money on spheres of exchange among the Tiv of Northern Nigeria, Guyer introduces historical and regional data to show how the spheres were not static and bounded, but rather dynamic institutions that facilitated asymmetrical exchange. In the region, multiple currencies circulated and each currency was oriented towards a limited number of transactions. Given the ecological niches of the

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<sup>10</sup> Instead of using the terms ‘formal economy’ and ‘informal economy’, Guyer refers to ‘formalities’ and ‘informalities’. In so doing, she emphasises the experiential and temporal character of converting wealth into formal ‘documents’ (Guyer 2004:155-169, 2007:193-194).

riverine system, each transaction referred “back to a place, a localised value and a past” (Guyer 2004:37), whilst also assuming a future directionality towards its purchases in a different place<sup>11</sup>. As merchants constantly introduced new currencies in order to capitalise on optimal profit-margins, forms of convertibility continually changed. This system of trade was not isolated from other kinds of exchanges, but formed a “subtype of a much larger phenomenon” (ibid.:42). Supported by an underlying ‘ideology of transformation’ with a capacity to define social rank and political power in the past as well as today (ibid.:74-79, 101-114), this institutional complex incorporated European transactions, such as the import of outdated guns as currency in the 1880s and the conversion of funerary statues into capital destined for European art collectors.

The asymmetry in monetary transactions is thus a centrifugal force that expands outwards with a potential to incorporate ever new exchange partners, as long as a value disjuncture is ascertained. Within this framework, seemingly disparate economies with marked thresholds of convertibility are brought into proximity, regardless of their degree of formalisation by the state bureaucracy. European colonial governments exchanged goods along asymmetrical trade routes for African art, while today’s national banks extend credit that is converted into houses, agricultural labour and ceremonial celebrations. Both the formal and informal economies are implicated in this single cultural configuration of exchange relationships, where it is the defined ‘margin’ rather than the degree of formality that lends meaning to the specific economic activity. In analysing margins, Guyer not only advocates a temporal perspective within which the analyst is sensitive to the trajectories of transactions, but she also endorses “reasoning, purposive behaviour, and strategic means-end thinking as appropriate subject matter for anthropology” (2004:25). In this book I attempt to do both.

In studying the emerging informal gold mining economy in Uyanga, I draw on Guyer’s historical and integrative approach to economic life. As I examine the relationship between monetary earnings in the mines and pastoral wealth on the steppe, I follow the trajectories of wealth production across stark physical and moral divides. I position such economic activities within changing landscapes of temperamental spirits that may bless humans with fortunes or punish them with their wrath. Instead of assuming the static incommensurability of pastoral and mining economies, I thus consider the momentary interstices and possible convergences of these economies<sup>12</sup>. That is, I strive to make sense of economic life by applying an encompassing and

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<sup>11</sup> See also Roopnaraine (2001) for a similar account of value transformations facilitated by riverine trade in Guyana.

<sup>12</sup> See also Harris (1989) for a similar approach to the peasant and mining economies of Bolivia. Whilst scholars, such as Taussig (1980), have argued for the mutual incompatibility of such economies, Harris shows that, beyond their

dynamic perspective, which is grounded in a more general analytical and ethnographic appreciation of asymmetry. Whilst an emphasis on asymmetry allows me to consider expanding and unstable social relationships and economic circuits among herders and miners, it also reflects particular Mongolian notions of personhood. Indeed, much cultural value is attached to the act of giving, which is expressed through expectations of generosity in relations to both humans and spirits in life as well as in death. By emphasising giving rather than exchanging, asymmetry rather than homology, my intention is to apply an analytical framework that is both rooted in and supported by local registers of value. In this way I hope the ensuing analysis will not deflect from the central concerns and interests of herders and miners in Uyanga.

In methodological terms, I approach such social dynamics by attending to ‘micro-level’ practices that allow us to consider the interests and motivations of our informants. Focusing on quotidian verbal and physical interaction, I draw much inspiration from Goffman’s studies of face-to-face interactions. Whilst I distance myself from his excessive rationalism<sup>13</sup>, the work of Goffman provides an unmatched degree of analytical clarity and focus on what he calls the ‘interaction order’ and its implications for the ‘interactant’. By taking seriously the minutiae of everyday life, Goffman contributed to the scholarly recognition of the importance of previously ignored social practices for an understanding of social life more broadly. At a time when analytical models centred around notions of structure, Goffman also underscored the interests, motivations and agency of individuals. Although much of Goffman’s (1967, 1981) work involves elaborate typologies of speech roles and interactive behaviour, for the present purposes it is sufficient to merely acknowledge his contribution to the decomposition of the speaker-listener dyad as the measure of all talk. His typologies fractured simplified models of social interaction as well as the idea of a stable, unitary agent. In this book my interest in the work of Goffman comes to fore in my attention to micro-practices, as well as, more generally, in my concern with the frustrations, motivations and interests of people as they live within proximity of an emerging gold mining economy.

### **Anthropology and patriarchy**

Drawing on models from economic anthropology of expanding asymmetrical relations, I also approach patriarchy in ways that recognise the unstable dynamics of its negotiation and

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economic interrelation, peasant and mining economies also draw on shared political ideologies and symbolism. Indeed, Nash’s (1993 [1979]) celebrated ethnography on Bolivian tin miners shows how pre-Conquest religious practices strengthen worker solidarity when faced with exploitative industrial relations.

<sup>13</sup> See for example his application of game-theory (Goffman 1969).

reproduction. However, current studies of gendered hierarchies are predominantly informed by agendas that differ significantly from the analytical aspirations of this book. As a result, this section will firstly explore the genealogy of patriarchy as an analytical concept within the social sciences and secondly propose a much overdue re-conceptualisation of patriarchy as an analytical concept in anthropology.

Recent anthropological scholarship on the gendered organisation of power rarely employs the term ‘patriarchy’ as an analytical concept. Indeed, it seems to have become so marginal to the analytical vocabulary of the social sciences that its appearance is mostly limited to certain strands of feminist scholarship (Walby 1990, Websdale 1998) and studies of Islamic regions (Afkhani and Friedl 1994, Kandiyoti 1998, Mojab and Abdo 2004). In accounting for the current minimal use of the term, one might assume that anthropologists are no longer interested in issues of patriarchy. It is now a couple of decades ago that gender battles were central to both academic theories and popular discourses, and they hardly seem to be in the process of regaining their past prominence. Moreover, given the concerted efforts by anthropologists to deconstruct and de-essentialise enduring theoretical models, the concept of patriarchy has quietly dissolved alongside the questioning of its constitutive categories, such as power and gender. The quest for fragmentation, plurality and ambiguity in anthropological models has problematised both specific analytic categories and the overarching constellations of which they form a part. As such, the concept of patriarchy indeed seems practically and analytically obsolete.

However, a closer look at current anthropological research reveals a continuing interest in the same analytical issues but addressed through different terminology. Today’s currency is now concepts such as ‘gendered hierarchy’ (Butler 1990) and ‘masculine domination’ (Bourdieu 2001), which avoid essentialising the power holder as *a priori* male and thus acknowledge discussions about performativity and culturally specific notions of sex and gender. Furthermore, such concepts appear to tap into radically different paradigms than the ones related to patriarchy. In order to appreciate the significance of this possible dissociation, I will now turn to a consideration of the close epistemological continuity between the early evolutionary uses of the term and its later appropriation by feminist scholars.

In 1861 Henry Maine defended the old-established notion of patriarchal society as forming “the primeval condition of the human race” (2002 [1861]:122) and situated it within an influential legal framework. Although rejected and often ignored today, his exposition illustrates clearly the early analytical centrality of patriarchy within evolutionary models of society. He argued that in ‘ancient

society' people were compelled by a semi-conscious moral duty to obey and respect their eldest living male ascendant of the family (ibid.:146). This male elder held 'despotic' power over all members of his household, comprising his wife, their progeny and families, as well as slaves and adopted children. This power (*patria potestas*) was institutionalised in Roman Law, which was Maine's primary source of evidence, and accorded the male household head full control over all matters related to the life and death of his household members. However, eventually these family units incorporated so many adopted strangers that the ideology of kinship could no longer convincingly categorise people who were subject to a single patriarch, and the power of the patriarch thus gradually diminished (ibid.:130). As legal rights and duties became less rooted in people's status within patriarchal families, 'modern society' saw the growing importance of contract, established between unrelated individuals (ibid.:170). As such, the progressive codification of civil law and the emergence of individual rights in property can be seen as a variation on the enduring topic of the relationship between a tradition-bound, status-based *Gemeinschaft* (community) and individualised contract-bound *Gesellschaft* (society).

Whilst this teleological model undoubtedly became more prominent in theories advanced by scholars such as Durkheim, Weber and Parsons, I suggest that the evolutionary framework within which Maine advanced his theory has had a lasting impact on later uses of the term patriarchy. In seeking to uncover the engine behind the supposed progress of jurisprudence, Maine identifies patriarchal power with particular stages on a unitary ladder of societal development as well as institutionalised structures spanning across societies. Given his interest in comparative law, Maine is not concerned with the empirical, and even legislative, details of how patriarchy was produced within Roman family groups<sup>14</sup>. Rather, by inferring from an abstracted, logical household prototype, he uncritically equates society with patriarchy (ibid.:126). In this way, Maine not only reproduces the privileged position of patriarchal families as the primary legal unit within Roman Law, but also uncritically turns Roman legislation into a parallel social scientific model of society. As families become 'empires' and their male ascendants 'rulers' (ibid.:133, 145), analytical levels collapse and inferences can travel freely from 'the patriarchal family' to 'the patriarchal society'. Instead of being an analytical concept tied to the household, patriarchy indeed becomes an accommodating abstraction of society at large.

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<sup>14</sup> Crucial changes in Roman family law, for example, are hardly mentioned by Maine. According to Frier and McGinn (2004), the tradition of *manus* marriage whereby an in-marriage wife is under the legal control of her father-in-law gave way for a new marriage practice whereby a married woman remained under the legal control of her father (ibid.:448). Although Maine heralds the impressive historical documentation of Roman Law, he does not elaborate on the significance of such changes in marriage practices, nor does he mention the rise of free divorce, a seemingly crucial practice for a discussion about the legal power of male household heads.

The subsequent models of the evolution of society advanced over the course of the following decades by, among others, Bachofen (1861), McLennan (1865) and Morgan (1877) consistently used patriarchy in referring to 1) an evolutionary stage, 2) a form of societal organisation (as opposed to household only), and 3) an institutionalised functional structure. Whereas Maine suggested that patriarchy formed the earliest stage of human society, his opponents argued that he had misunderstood the direction of development. Based on a study of classical myths, Bachofen, for example, concluded that “the most ancient societies were controlled not by patriarchs but by women” (Bachofen quoted in Kuper 2005 [1988]:54). This ‘matriarchy thesis’ embroiled the concept of patriarchy as its linearly opposed, internally coherent and unitary referent. Thus encapsulated within competing models of evolutionary progress, patriarchy was a key analytical concept of the nineteenth century and was readily incorporated into the similarly universal models advanced by Marx and Engels.

Inspired by Morgan’s (1877) discovery of the evolving correlation between kinship groups and societal organisation, Engels argues in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) that the family is not a natural institution, but instead a particular stage in the economic development of society<sup>15</sup>. Rather than being the benign product of man’s best instinct, as Morgan believed (Kuper 2005 [1988]:80), Engels suggests that the family is the product of exploitative capitalism. Indeed, patriarchy is not represented as the origin of society but as the necessary hurdle for the emergence of communism. Forming a germ of the class antagonism and domination witnessed in capitalist society, patriarchal families are exploitative units within which the husband holds bourgeois supremacy over his oppressed wife (Engels 1940 [1884]:128). As she gives birth, the division of labour is established within the family, and the wife and child become instruments to the husband’s greed for accumulating private property. As stated by Engels,

The overthrow of mother-right was the *world historical defeat of the female sex*. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children (Engels 1940 [1884]:59, emphasis in original).

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<sup>15</sup> Whilst Engels is the author of *The Origin*, published a year after the death of Marx, he acknowledges the foundational research Marx carried out for the publication and presents the book as “the execution of a bequest” (Engels 1940 [1884]:71). The direct influence of Marx is evidenced in Engels’s extensive use of quotations from Marx’s notebooks from the period 1880-1882 (see Krader 1972).

In pairing up kinship<sup>16</sup>, patriarchy and emerging capitalism, Engels not only presents another model of the genesis of modern society but, most importantly, positions the scheme of transformations within an explicit and consistent value-judgement. Within this moral universe, patriarchy is a form of social organisation that ought to be overturned and securely lodged in the past. Accounting for the material conditions of male domination, Engels thus presents patriarchy as a problem of history; as something which *can* be forcefully overcome. Instead of denoting a necessary stage within an inflexible order of evolution, the Marxist conceptualisation of patriarchy introduces the dialectical possibility of its conscious and desired elimination. Incorporating the potential for human agency into the evolutionary model of female subordination, patriarchy becomes a call for political action.

As various strands of feminist scholarship beginning in the 1970s (Alexander and Taylor 1980, Hartmann 1981, Walby 1986) responded to such calls and readily incorporated the materialist conception of patriarchy into their analytical vocabulary, Eisenstein (1979, 1981) strove most forcefully to unite feminist agendas with the Marxist struggle<sup>17</sup>. In developing the concept of ‘capitalist patriarchy’, Eisenstein emphasised “the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring” (Eisenstein 1979:5). Although Marx and Engels recognised the gendered power relations within the family, she laments how relations beyond the family are not similarly described as gendered. Mothers and fathers, wives and husbands become part of the genderless labour force, where workers are distinguished, at the most, by their classificatory job titles such as peasants, merchants and land owners<sup>18</sup>. The sexual division of labour has no defined or contingent existence within early Marxism and ultimately class membership is therefore based on radically different criteria inside and outside the family. According to Eisenstein, it is only by considering both the sexual and economic material conditions that the reciprocal relationship between production and reproduction, society and family, can be fully appreciated. Although Engels saw patriarchy as rooted in the domestic organisation of production and reproduction, Eisenstein argues that its relevance for capitalist relations is not similarly confined. Indeed, the patriarchal family fundamentally supports and facilitates the

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<sup>16</sup> Engels does not make a clear distinction between patriliney and patriarchy, as noted by Bloch (1983:57). Indeed, this is a common oversight in both the earlier kinship studies (e.g. Morgan) and the later kinship studies (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown and Fortes). Although descent and gendered status do not correlate in a simple linear way, it is unlikely that they are entirely independent.

<sup>17</sup> Since the literature combining Marxism and feminism is vast and ever growing, I have chosen to highlight Eisenstein due to her widely recognised and often approved theoretical contribution to the coinage of the term ‘capitalist patriarchy’. However, I acknowledge the large body of feminist scholarship that indeed explicitly focuses on Engels’s work on the family (see for example Sacks 1975).

<sup>18</sup> Gayle Rubin points out the few and brief passages in Marx’s writings on the ‘reproduction of labour power’ (Rubin 1975:162, 164). She shows how Marx’s dismissive comments concerning ‘sex, sexuality, and sex oppression’ reproduces the patriarchal traffic in women.



particular economic mode of capitalism (ibid.:13)<sup>19</sup>. Patriarchy is thus not tangential to capitalism, but rather so fundamental that scholars such as Eisenstein believe in its universal existence within capitalist economies. As patriarchy became a class institution within feminist agendas, it was transferred from the toolbox of the distanced evolutionary analyst and placed directly into the hands of the oppressed.

As a political label for domestic exploitation, the definitions of patriarchy thus became as multiple and malleable as the personal experiences and political interests of scholars. Rather than being a static analytical concept within teleological models, patriarchy was liberated from its past paradigm and lost its consistent and expected signification. Whilst this individualisation of the concept has enabled a broader range of its largely feminist application (such as sociological studies of domestic violence, psychoanalytical studies of gender identities and historical studies of the subaltern), discussions tend to focus on criticising the concept for its shortcomings (Barrett 1980, Beechey 1979, Rowbotham 1979), rather than proposing its redefinition or replacement. However, in my view the current ‘problem with patriarchy’ is not simply about specific authors’ definitions and uses of the concept, but rather with the implications of the current, near ubiquitous, identification of patriarchy with feminism.

In order to explicate my position, I will first draw on Strathern’s (1987) argument regarding the ‘awkward relationship between feminism and anthropology’. She suggests that feminist scholarship is unable to offer its self-proclaimed challenges to anthropological perspectives due to the radically different ways in which the two scholarly communities define their relationship with their subject matter. Feminists see themselves as “challenging stereotypes that misrepresent women’s experiences” (ibid.:287) by uncovering the patriarchal structures that determine the feminine experience, often objectified simply as ‘men’. By utilising feminine experiences as unique female instruments, feminists position themselves in opposition to a non-female, oppressive Other; an oppositional relationship on which the feminist insight and struggle hinges. In contrast, anthropologists use their own experience as a lens through which a deliberately foreign Other may be understood. In order to facilitate understanding, however, “the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the effort is to create a relation with the Other, as in the search for a medium of expression that will offer mutual interpretation” (ibid.:289). As a result, since feminism and anthropology pivot on differently organised relationships between self and Other, their dialogue is framed as well as constrained by the potential of undermining each other’s epistemologies. Despite a shared interest

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<sup>19</sup> Many feminists disagree on this point. By referring to Freudian psychoanalysis and the patriarchal structure of the

in gendered social life, the radically different conditions for their knowledge production renders dialogue inevitably awkward.

Strathern's critique of the limited commonality between feminism and anthropology may highlight a need for the anthropological reconceptualisation of concepts such as patriarchy beyond feminist rhetoric and agendas. Indeed, the influence of feminist scholarship on the concept of patriarchy is clearly evidenced in the following recent definition of the term in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*: "Patriarchy is a social system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Outhwaite 2003:462). Although alternative concepts such as 'gendered hierarchy' (Butler 1990) and 'masculine domination' (Bourdieu 2001) have been introduced, they have formed part of a contemporary feminist debate about the universality and enduring nature of male domination. Whilst the current terminology allows for greater flexibility, ambiguity and diversity than the concept of patriarchy, it indeed continues the bifurcating approach to gendered relations that characterised the past, focussing exclusively on men's structural exploitation of women. This *a priori* division between subordinate women and dominating men turns the ensuing analysis into a self-fulfilling prophecy of repression. The theoretical model is both empirically and analytically unable to accommodate cross-structural practices. Questions regarding, for example, generational interests or male-male relations for the assertion of power are rendered insignificant and even irrelevant. The de-constructivist concepts remain firmly grounded in the feminist oppositional view of gender relations, hindering a non-feminist analysis of gendered power structures.

Secondly, whilst the analyses by Butler and Bourdieu are centrally concerned with society/societies at large, their analyses invariably incorporate fundamental assumptions about a male dominated household power structure. By discarding the concept of patriarchy on the grounds of it being "a repressive and regulatory structure" that is part of a "colonizing epistemological strategy" (Butler 1990:46), Butler fails to recognise her continuing presupposition of domestic 'androcentric dominance'<sup>20</sup>. In emphasising fragmentation, ambiguity and performativity, power structures, such as patriarchy, are left as political remnants of a feminist agenda rather than analytical concepts capable of sensitively historicising current practices. In discussing the implications of the de-construction of gender, Moore (2006) has argued that assumptions of fragmentation may reflect the experience and imagination of hyper-individualisation in contemporary society rather than actually offering a useful rethinking of our analytic categories.

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Oedipus Complex, scholars such as Mitchell (1974) insist that patriarchy precedes capitalism.

We do need to be attentive to historical diversity and to critique meta-narratives and avoid universalising categories. (...) However, there is a sense in which difference has now become the new essentialism. The grand narratives of liberal humanism have given way to the grand narratives of difference. Difference in the social sciences is now a pretheoretical assumption and that should be a call to critical self-reflection, if not a source of concern (Moore 2006:41).

Following Moore's contemplation, I distance myself from the new terminology, which essentialises fragmentation and difference, and instead suggest the reintroduction of the concept of patriarchy into the anthropological vocabulary. Having shown its genealogy from early evolutionist models to present-day feminist scholarship, I agree with Butler and Bourdieu that patriarchy has come to have unfortunate connotations of evolution, universality and oppression. However, rather than continuing the search for new and increasingly vague terminology, I believe the old concept has the most important quality for an analytical construct: specificity. In order to re-distil its specificity, it is crucial to dissociate patriarchy from the theories it has engendered. Patriarchy is, as I use it in this book, an analytical concept, not a theory. By returning the concept to its etymological root of the household<sup>21</sup>, I follow an earlier non-teleological definition of patriarchy provided by Weber (1922):

Within the household authority is the private prerogative of the master, who has been designated in accordance with definite rules of inheritance. He has no administrative staff and no machinery to enforce his will but depends on the willingness of the group members to respect his authority, which he exercises on behalf of the group as a whole. The members of the household stand in an entirely personal relation to him. They obey him and he commands them in the belief that his right and their duty are part of an inviolable order that has the sanctity of immemorial tradition (Bendix 1998:331, see also Weber 1968:231).

The concept of patriarchy is central to Weber's writings on Patriarchalism (an ideal type of 'traditional domination') and its relationship to other forms of domination. By referring to his definition of patriarchy, I do not intend to reproduce his larger theoretical framework, but rather his detailed conceptualisation of patriarchy as a gendered organisation of power within households<sup>22</sup>. In contrast to more recent definitions and uses of the concept, Weber remains sensitive to the relationship between the power holder and the other members of his household. By avoiding the

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<sup>20</sup> See also Bourdieu (2001:32).

<sup>21</sup> As the 'household' has been criticised for its connotations of monolithic unity and systemic internal coherence, I use it to refer to the culturally specific form of domestic organisation. The 'household' is thus a material and organic entity rather than a Western ideology.

otherwise *a priori* oppositional gender framework, Weber's definition moves away from patriarchy as a monolithic power structure that enjoys an undertheorised existence. As my fieldwork constantly drew attention to the ways in which patriarchy is produced and reasserted by male and female household members, I will use Weber's definition of patriarchy throughout this book.

Using a concept of patriarchy that does not presume oppositional gender relations, the book demonstrates the fundamental and intricate relationship between household organisation and involvement in local emerging economies. Instead of forming the predicted conclusion of gendered domination and exploitation, patriarchy is the starting point for my analysis. By recognising the unstable and asymmetrical dynamics of domestic relations, involvement in multiple and diverse 'registers of value' (Guyer 2004) becomes a logical corollary rather than a hyper-extension into seemingly unrelated realms. Instead of relying on a doctrine of rigid bifurcation between essential equivalents, I am proposing to take seriously the asymmetrical relations that implicate persons in households and, by extension, in society. Patriarchal herding households are in this sense not isolated loci of power, divorced from its members' involvement in other social practices, but rather positioned centrally within expansive and dynamic relations, reaching far beyond the steppe and extending into the gold mines. As a result, whereas performativity and disjuncture are part of the foundational propositions of Butler and Bourdieu, I consider such emphases evidenced in the asymmetrical relations in which people take part. Patriarchy as an analytical concept of asymmetry thus allows for a greater recognition of the convergence between social processes and local economic circuits that may at first appear incongruent and conflictive.

## Summary of chapters

The order of the chapters in this book is intended to correspond to the movement of people between the steppe and the mines. The reason behind using this structure is twofold: firstly, to aid the reader in following chronologically the practical relationship between the herding and mining economies, and secondly, to signpost my overall argument about the nature of this relationship.

In chapter two I show the great extent to which patriarchal relations within herding household groups are produced by household members other than the senior male household head. However,

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<sup>22</sup> Weber argues that by extending the patriarchal rule beyond the household, the same structure of domination can rule over larger territories. He refers specifically to the Mongol Empire as an example of such 'patrimonial rule' (Bendix 1998:354, 356).

alongside their reassertion of patriarchy, these members also voice frustration and express desire to live away from the patriarchal hierarchy. Whilst a general cultural value is placed on individual competence and self-reliance, I suggest that the potential of the daughter-in-law for autonomy provides household members with an immediate model upon which they can contemplate and potentially realise their own separation from the household group. As the large-scale gold rush is taking place in the vicinity, household members now have new sources of subsistence that are relatively independent of the herding economy and its patriarchal households. However, with household members entertaining the possibility of leaving for the mines, I show how patriarchs attempt to consolidate their power over their disintegrating households. This chapter thus demonstrates the close relationship between the gendered kin organisation of herding households and the local emergence of a mining economy.

In chapter three I continue my exploration into the ways in which the physically distinct areas of the steppe and the mines intersect economically, ecologically and socially. Given such multiple and diverse junctures, I consider how miners socially distance themselves from patriarchal households. By examining practices of kinship and friendship, I argue that ninjas sustain social relationships that allow for and even demand assertions of autonomy. Engaging in different discourse genres and using particular verbal strategies, miners also assert a degree of informality that approximates a mockery of the hierarchical respectfulness with which kinsmen interact. Indeed, whilst kinsmen are often present in the mines, they rarely work or live together. By limiting social interactions with kin, ninjas avoid the expected positions of subordination. As the sociality of miners asserts their successful separation from kin hierarchies, herders represent them as dangerous strangers rather than local kinsmen. As such, this chapter emphasises the tense mutual implication of local pastoralism and ninja mining, despite their striking differences.

In chapter four I examine how local ideas about different kinds of wealth have the potential to suppress the dangerous sociality of the mines. Since the wealth of herders is largely visible, countable and comparable, expectations of generosity are overt and unavoidable for herding household. By examining the perils of envy and ‘malicious gossip’ (*hel am*), I suggest that involvement in ninja mining, with its variable and concealable monetary wealth, provides herding households with an opportunity to circumvent social expectations. As ninja money is incorporated into the herding economy, the accumulation of wealth is no longer necessarily visible nor matched by growing expectations of generosity. As ‘malicious gossip’ can in effect only be instigated by patriarchs holding detailed knowledge about the victim’s wealth, ninja mining also provides a degree of protection against such black magic attacks. However, by marking money earned from

mining as ‘polluted’ (*buzartai möngö*), the socially and cosmologically subversive acts of mining are forcefully marginalised. In focussing on local subsistence economies, this chapter highlights the relationship between claims to power and ideas about wealth.

Chapter five considers how changing interactions with the landscape are conceived within local cosmology. By analysing ideas about and worship of spirits, I argue that the spirits of the steppe reinforce patriarchal power by emphasising the household group and male seniority as the focus for human-spirit interactions. However, by transgressing taboos (*tseer*) related to the land, ninjas position themselves beyond the hierarchies of both kinsmen and local spirits, and instead worship the ‘new’ and ‘dangerous’ black spirits of the mines. As calamities such as mining accidents, illnesses and wolf attacks are readily blamed on ninjas for their disrespectful actions, herders also fear the rumoured ability of ninjas to manipulate the dangerous ‘power of gold’ (*altny chadvar*) in black magic rituals. It is thus herders’ fears of black magic by ninjas, rather than explicit cases of attacks, that allow ninjas to achieve individual power and autonomy. This chapter thus shows the significance of approaching landscape and religion as part of everyday practices for an understanding of emerging economies.

Given this landscape of angry spirits and impending calamities, chapter six is concerned with the ways in which local ninjas are re-incorporated into herding household groups in visiting situations. As ninjas return to the herding areas for shorter or longer periods, their most frequent interaction with herders is in drinking situations during visits. Although social drinking is a cornerstone of daily life on the steppe as well as in the mines, drinking practices differ radically between the two areas. I analyse the local practice of ‘fake drinking’ (*hudlaa sogtuu*), whereby the visitor pretends to be drunk. This is a common practice on the steppe and is carried out by ninjas who maintain close attachments to herding households. I suggest that this local practice is a way for ninjas to become morally included in herding households by displaying their intimate familiarity with herders’ highly formal and ritualised drinking as opposed to the unceremonious ninja drinking in which they now most often partake. This chapter thus shows how drinking practices facilitate the expression and negotiation of morality in a dichotomised landscape.

## Chapter 2: The Burden of Patriarchy

### Introduction

It was early morning and everybody was sleeping. I crawled out from under the blankets, trying to avoid waking up my host sisters<sup>1</sup> who were sleeping on both sides of me on the floor. My host parents started moving around in their bed and one of my brothers, who slept in the only other bed, stopped snoring for a few breaths. The ten or so square-metres of the *ger* somehow managed to accommodate all seven of us, making early morning duties difficult to go about without waking up the others. I quickly put on my *deel* (robe), opened the low door and carefully stepped out into the still darkness. A couple of yaks jumped up as I walked past them, and the herd of sheep started to move about noisily. The eldest brother's *ger* was about one hundred meters from ours and he shared it with his wife and child. Their door suddenly swung open and my host brother greeted me with a subdued voice. He and I were going to the largest ninja mining area to sell milk as we did every other morning in the lush summer months when our yaks and mares yielded great amounts of milk. He started his motorbike, motioned for me to jump up behind, and soon we were driving across the desolate steppe with several large milk containers strapped to both sides of the bike. Upon crossing the first mountain pass, he started telling me about how difficult it could sometimes be to accept all the decisions made by his father.

Towards the end of my fieldwork such voiced frustrations were relatively common, and various family members confided their concerns when herding tasks or other domestic duties took us far away from our cluster of *gers*. My host father was one of the wealthiest and oldest herders in the area, and immediate respect was expected to accompany his movements within and beyond our *ail*. Whilst he was respected for being a nice and generous man, he also decided single-handedly over all final matters relating to the *ail* and its herd. Indeed, he was a strong-headed man who enjoyed a good discussion with family members and other visitors. However, since we lived in a remote mountainous region with the nearest neighbour living on the other side of the mountain, we would sometimes go days without seeing any visitors.

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<sup>1</sup> All kinship terms are designated with the anthropologist as ego.



**Figure 1: Living remotely**

Especially the eight months long winter entailed a remarkable degree of seclusion whereby our daily entertainment was entirely drawn from and dependent upon each other's company. At such times, my host father could be seen walking alone behind his herd, bow-legged, leaning slightly forward and with his hands clasped against his back. Or, he would sit in the honoured Northern part of the *ger*, lighting a butter candle (*zul*) on the altar before launching into a monologue about a matter he considered urgent or simply interesting. Topics concerned, for example, the kind of medical treatment he thought necessary for sick family members. Or, the kind of tea he wanted to buy upon his next visit to the village (*sumyn töv*), which was about thirty minutes motorbike ride, or one hour horse ride, away. As he spoke, family members occasionally mumbled their discontent with his decisions. Given my host father's poor hearing, it was likely that he simply did not notice their objections. However, when he did, he looked sternly at the person in question and invariably said: "what?" (*yuü?*). The particular household member eventually grew quiet and my host father would continue his speech.



In this chapter I will introduce life on the steppe among the mobile pastoralists of Uyanga who live approximately twenty kilometres from the large ninja mining areas (*shoroony gazar*<sup>2</sup>) and the nearest village. In order for the reader to appreciate the significance of the close physical proximity of mining for herding households, I will focus on the contexts within which ninja mining most forcefully comes up in daily conversations and practices. Prior to carrying out my fieldwork, I presumed that such contexts would be related to the obvious environmental incompatibility of herding and mining. With thousands of ninjas panning for gold, they would turn clean rivers into stagnant mud, thus leaving herders with no drinking water for themselves and their animals. Moreover, as fertile pastureland was perforated with deep mining holes, connected underground with unsupported tunnels, mining areas would never again become safe for human and animal habitation. These environmental disasters have indeed happened and herders often lament the seemingly gloomy future ahead of them. This reality struck me one winter during fieldwork when we ran out of drinking water. Living upriver from the mines, our water was not polluted with heavy metals and sediments from the panning, but the water flow to the mines was so fast as to drain the few springs in our valley. When our spring one day dried out, we were entirely dependent on snow fall. We filled bags with snow, which we carried back to our *ger* and stored indoors until needed<sup>3</sup>. However, when precipitation stopped at the height of winter and we had no more snow to collect, desperation took over. In such a situation my hosts furiously blamed the nearby mining for our feared predicament. Fortunately, in daily life such drastic conflicts are rare. Indeed, complaints about the environmental consequences of mining are usually incorporated into informal conversations about the difficulties of a herding livelihood, ranging from decreasing water levels and wolf attacks to local thieves. Whilst in chapter five I examine how herders and miners perceive the changing landscape of Uyanga, I will in this chapter consider the personal situations when my hosts on the steppe brought up issues of ninja mining. These situations arose particularly when discussing the relationship between the daily reality of patriarchy in herding *ails* and the possibility of an alternative livelihood presented by ninja mining.

In order to understand how patriarchy is produced and sustained by members of herding households, I will first discuss practices and ideologies of kin organisation in relation to the works by Sneath (2000) and Vreeland (1954). Although the gendered hierarchical organisation of power within households does not relate in any simple or direct way to kinship, it is, however, hard to

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<sup>2</sup> Among locals, people refer to the ninja mining areas as *altny gazar* (gold area) or *shoroony gazar* (dust area). However, outside Uyanga such areas are usually referred to with the much more formal terms such as *uurhai* (mine) and *olborloltyn gazar* (mining area).

<sup>3</sup> We also carved out large chunks of ice from a river on the other side of our mountain. These practices of melting water from snow and ice are common today in Uyanga.

imagine patriarchy to be entirely independent of kin organisation. I then proceed to examine quotidian social interactions, such as chatting, lying and learning. Rather than isolating and giving priority to the household head's exercise of power, I consider the household group as a composite collectivity consisting of multiple people with different aims, wishes and concerns, yet who share strategies for asserting their status position (Howe 1998). Indeed, the quotidian negotiations of relative status within the household group rarely involve the patriarch, and his near absence in the ethnographic examples in this chapter therefore reflects his discursive and/or physical absence in such situations.

I suggest that the patriarchal relations within the household are to a great extent produced and sustained by members other than the household head. However, alongside reasserting the gendered hierarchy, these members also lament how patriarchy is an immense burden beyond which they desire to live. Given ideas about the interstitial position of the in-marrying daughter-in-law (Humphrey 1978, 1993b), her potential for leaving the patriarchal household expresses the more general cultural value placed on individual competence, self-reliance and autonomy. As herding families live closely together in a remote area, I argue that the positionality of the daughter-in-law (*ber*) provides other household members with an immediate model upon which they can contemplate and possibly realise their own separation from the household group. With a large-scale gold rush taking place in the vicinity, household members may now find sources of subsistence that are relatively independent of the herding economy and its patriarchal household structure. As household members entertain the possibility of leaving for the mines, I conclude by addressing the ways in which patriarchs attempt to consolidate their power over disintegrating households. Whilst patriarchal relations are largely reproduced by other household members in everyday life, the head asserts his dominance in times of crisis. This chapter thus illustrates the close relationship between the gendered kin organisation of herding households and the local emergence of a mining economy.

## **Mongolian kinship**

In colloquial Mongolian there are numerous words and ways in which a speaker can denote a relationship to be one of kinship. Words such as *hamaatan* (lit. a person with a relationship) and *töröl sadan* (lit. a birth relation) are thus commonly used to refer to non-specified bilaterally recognised relationships. Depending on the perceived distance between ego and the person in question, the qualifying adjectives of *oir* or *hol* can be added. As much of daily life takes part among such 'relatives', I soon wanted to distinguish the relations further. In response, people referred to 'bone relatives' (*yasan töröl*, relatives on father's side) and 'blood relatives' (*tsusan*

*töröl*, relatives on mother's side). At times when the relationship was far removed from ego, a long pause would follow my inquiry before reaching one of two tentative conclusions: 'this person is probably a blood relative' (*ter hün tsusan töröl baihaa*). At other times, people referred to the *ovog*; a term which included their own nuclear family, their agnatic kindred<sup>4</sup>, as well as the few previous generations that they could usually remember (rarely more than three generations). Acknowledging the fluid conceptualisation and minimal generational depths of *ovog*, I translate this term as 'patriclan'<sup>5</sup>. Such *ovog töröl*, especially the deceased father of the household head, are commemorated with photos and drawings, positioned near altars in *gers*, and are sometimes matched by similar photos of matrilineal predecessors.

When interacting with 'relatives', the anthropologist's kinship diagrams come alive and provide a much needed guide for using the correct personal pronouns. Generally, the honorific pronoun *ta* (You) is used when addressing someone older than ego, and the informal *chi* (you) is used for someone younger. Also, women are more often than men referred to with *chi*. As a result, the male household head is the only member of the household who is always addressed with *ta*, linguistically singling him out as the respected apex of the *ail*. However, in cases of generational difference, relative age does not determine the appropriate personal pronoun. For example, ego refers to his father's brother with *ta* regardless of the age of ego's paternal uncle<sup>6</sup>. Whereas in the past, and still in some areas today, all relatives through mother's brother are addressed with *ta*, in Uyanga such matrilineal linguistic emphasis is not practiced<sup>7</sup>. In navigating the use of appropriate pronouns among kinsmen, ego is thus reminded of how people were related in the past and how these past relations extend into the present. Whilst the ideology of kin relatedness in this sense seems to constrict and contain people within a strict generational framework, it is also, in a different sense, expansive and inclusive. Indeed, the idiom of kinship abounds in everyday speech where people use kin terminology to refer respectfully to kin and non-kin alike, such as *egch* for a female older than

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'kindred' as opposed to 'kin', since affines of agnatic kin are also considered part of the *ovog*. As a result, my host father's brothers, their wives and children are all included in his *ovog*. With regards to membership, the *ovog* thus appears similar to the patronymic groups among Eastern and Western Tuvians (Vainshtein 1980:240), yet does not share their fixed ancestor-focus and communal migration pattern.

<sup>5</sup> In using the term 'patriclan', I do not intend to imply that clans in Uyanga approximate the noble Borjigid clan (descendants of the same lineage as Chinggis Khan) or the impressive 20-generation deep clans of the Barguzin of Buryatia (Humphrey and Sneath 1999:26). However, since local conceptions of *ovog* imply a perspective from ego rather than from a fixed ancestor and extend beyond a strict conceptualisation of patriliney, I find 'clan' the most appropriate translation. By specifying *ovog* as a 'patriclan', my intention is to convey the inclusion, with regards to previous generations, of agnatic rather than matrilineal or cognatic kindred. Acknowledging the political construction of clans across history in Inner Asia (Sneath 2007), I find that clans today are also an emic category of social organisation among commoners, commonly comprising 70-100 people.

<sup>6</sup> See Vreeland for a similar use of personal pronouns among kinsmen in his study of Halh Mongols in Western Mongolia (1954:67).

<sup>7</sup> Caroline Humphrey, personal communication.

ego, *ah* for a male older than ego, and *düü* for someone younger than ego<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, people also apply the expression *ah düü* to kin and non-kin with whom they have a particularly close, yet respectful relationship. As described by Sneath, the *ah düü* relationship “implies the relative equality of kin of the same generational level” (Sneath 2000:145) and is associated with both recreation and mutual obligations. When living on the steppe, one is thus constantly reminded of Pitt-Rivers’ insights into the significance of the complementary relationship between the ideologies of kinship and friendship, where “non-kin amity loves to masquerade as kinship” (Pitt-Rivers 1973:90). By using kin terminology in everyday life, people mark relationships within an explicit framework of relative status and desired trust. Being at once both expansive and restrictive, kin terminology configures most relationships within which ego takes part.

In order to understand the prevalence and significance of kin terminology, I will briefly describe the social landscape within which such terms are used. Since the vast and scarcely populated countryside bears little evidence of human presence, the scattered clusters of *gers* may appear fixed and stable to the untrained eye. However, their solidity belies the underlying flexible residential formations of which they are a product. During the long cold winter the *ail* usually has the fewest members. Some children will be in the village, where they stay with relatives and attend school<sup>9</sup>. Others might have gone to the capital to go to university or seek employment. With the coming of spring, the lambing season requires as many helping hands as possible and *ninja* miners might return to the *ails* of their relatives to help out. As the seasons change, the *ail* relocates to new pasture, providing the best conditions for the herd in terms of grass, water and shelter. If an *ail* has too many animals for the immediate pasture, one household may take their animals with them and join a smaller *ail* for a couple of months<sup>10</sup>. In the lush summer months, the remaining herd rapidly fattens up and yields great amounts of milk.

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<sup>8</sup> Such use of kin terminology is common in anthropological studies.

<sup>9</sup> According to a local school teacher, the majority of pupils come from *ninja* mining families. I noticed that in my host’s *bag* (smallest administrative unit), most herding families had either withdrawn their children from school or refused to let them enter school. I will return to this issue later in the chapter.

<sup>10</sup> In almost all the cases I am aware of in Uyanga, such temporary joint residence has been between agnatic kin.



**Figure 2: Yaks**

The meagre winter diet of meat and fat only is supplemented by a variety of dairy products, such as *süü*, *byaslag*, *tarag*, *aruul*, *shar tos* and *öröm* made from yak, mare, sheep and goat's milk<sup>11</sup>. Adults and children return from afar and spend a relaxing summer holiday with herding relatives. Benefiting from the long, warm summer days, many also go to the mines between June and September, before frost again sets in and renders panning for gold a particularly arduous task. Following the first snowfall, usually in mid September, the weakest animals are taken out on an extended migration (*otor*) to fertile pasture in order to better prepare them for the coming winter. By then, the *ail* has again sent off relatives and incorporated households wishing to spend the lonesome winter together.

These changes in size and composition of *aïls* not only vary according to season, but also to the different stages in the life cycle of its members (see Cooper 1995), especially marriage. As marriage in Uyanga is predominantly virilocal, the in-marrying bride leaves her natal home and relocates to her husband's *ail*<sup>12</sup>, where the young couple settles in their new *ger* and tends her dowry herd (*injiin*

<sup>11</sup> Although vegetables, such as potato, onion, carrot, cabbage and turnip, can be purchased for a small amount in the village, my host families and their relatives preferred meals without vegetables. Whereas some of them claimed to not like vegetables, others said that meat and fat were their preferred food.

<sup>12</sup> If the wife's parents are much wealthier than the husband's, uxrilocal marriage can be practiced (*hürgen oroh*). This is most likely to be the case if the wife's parents have no biological (*törsön*) or adopted (*örgömöl*) sons. However, there is much local stigma surrounding such practices and it appears rather humiliating for the husband to accept his incorporation into his father-in-law's *ail* (see also Humphrey 1978:99).

*mal*), if not also the husband's inherited herd (*huviin mal*). At times, the household head divides his herd into equal shares (*huv'*) and passes on the animals to his sons and daughters before his death. At other times, such inheritance is not distributed until after the death of the household head. Whilst the youngest son often stays with his parents and inherits their material property, it is common for the other sons to either remain in their parents' *ail* or join *ails* of other agnatic kin (Vreeland 1954:79-88).

In general, it is prohibited to marry *yasan töröl* (relatives on father's side) or *tsusan töröl* (relatives on mother's side). Since affinal households tend to reside far from each other, the following proverb expresses well local ideas about marriage:

If water and snow are close together, it is good.

If relatives-by-marriage are far apart, it is good<sup>13</sup>

(Vreeland 1954:64)

Whereas the degree to which parents have a say in arranging a marriage varies greatly, their approval is considered fundamental by all parties involved. Not only is the marriage ritual (including bride price and dowry) expensive for the families of both groom and wife, but their moral support is also important when tensions between the couple arise. With heavy drinking coupled with often difficult relations to the husband's household, it is not rare for wives to leave their husbands and seek divorce. As a woman can only keep minimal contact with her distant natal household after marriage, her early return to the parents' *ail* (or oldest brother in case the parents have died) hinges on their support and understanding. Similarly, a divorced man is likely to lose contact with his children and part of the herd (as the wife takes the dowry animals with her), and risks earning a reputation for misbehaviour (whether or not this is the case). He may also be considered a failed dependent on his parents' household. Parental support and cooperation is indeed so important that the involvement of parents (especially household heads) in arranging marriages seems to be growing at present; a point I will return to later in this chapter.

Compared to other parts of the Mongolian cultural region, in Uyanga there is a significant emphasis on agnatic kin ties within and beyond *ails*. It is possible that this residential pattern is an enduring regional feature. In a study of pastoral residential groups in the 1930s in the neighbouring province of Arhangai, Simukov notes that "there is a clear tendency to join up in *hotons* [*ails*] according to

kinship lines” where “agnatic kinship between household heads was the most important” (Simukov 1933:24-29, quoted in Sneath 2000: 214). While such a stress on agnatic ties may be characteristic of this region, the position of the male household head also seems much more autonomous and authoritarian than described for other parts of Mongolia. Writing about Halh Mongols in Western Mongolia, Vreeland notes, for example:

By 1920 the average senior woman of the family appears to have been almost on an equal footing with her husband. She had something to say in almost any issue. (..) She could take money from the family funds, on her own initiative, to pay for a temple service for some special occasion, and she could veto, or at least protest, expenditures by her husband or any man who was the nominal trustee for the family property. Her agreement had to be secured in any divisions or allotments of family animals.

(Vreeland 1954:54)

As described earlier in this chapter, in Uyanga the male household head is considered the apex of the *ail*, and no other household member approximates his position. Holding autonomous decision-making power, the household head only consults other household members before making a decision if he so prefers. Such decisions concern all aspects of daily life, ranging from quotidian herding decisions to extraordinary ritual events.

Given the extent to which household heads in Uyanga often decide single-handedly over matters, at times severely affecting other members, it is not surprising that people occasionally harbour strong emotions of resentment and anger. Although such disagreement is often suppressed, there were times during fieldwork when violence erupted. The following excerpt from my field notes describes a situation which concerns a dispute between the household head and his oldest son.

Earlier in the day, the oldest son had arrived from the mines with his family. Food was prepared, and people were chatting, laughing and having a good time together. In the evening our host father came back from a day of herding. He took a seat in the Northern part of the *ger*, received a large serving of food and hungrily started eating. The visiting son then received his portion and soon everybody turned their attention to the food. However, half way through the meal, the son asked his dad about a chore he had promised to carry out for his son. His dad gave a long, windy explanation and continued eating. The son stopped eating and looked angrily at his dad. “You haven’t done anything, have you?”. His wife immediately interjected: “Don’t say

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<sup>13</sup> Based on the classical Mongolian script, Vreeland transliterates the proverb as: “*Usa tsanai oiriin sain, Uruga*

that!” but the son continued: “I should go myself and do it”. His wife begged him to calm down, but suddenly the son jumped up and threw his porcelain bowl with full force through the *ger* in the direction of his wife and mother. It crashed to pieces and before the son managed to hit his crying wife, his dad ran across and intervened. The son attempted to hit his wife again and eventually stormed out of the *ger* and drove off.

(Field notes)

In the situation described above, the daughter-in-law pays the price for a dispute for which her husband and father-in-law were responsible. By defending the household head, the daughter-in-law acts as a good and loyal in-marrying wife. However, her submissive position within the household also invites her husband to take his anger out on her rather than on his father. As the household head holds a singular and unchallengeable position, frustrations with his actions expose the hierarchical relations among the other household members.

Writing about contemporary Inner Mongolia, Sneath presents much more balanced gender relations. He notes, for example, how daily decision-making is not carried out autonomously by the male household head, but is rather a process of consultation between husband, wife and children. Moreover, compared to Uyanga, the gendered division of labour is noticeably less strict. He writes:

In practice there is a large amount of overlap between male and female work. If they are without the company of those of the opposite gender, men and women have to cope with both types of work. Men cook when there are no women around (such as when they are working far from their *ail*) or if their wives are ill. If they are in the household men will often provide some level of childcare, and sometimes help prepare food – particularly when the family treats itself to *bansh* which the whole family usually makes together.

(Sneath 2000:180)

Within the regional literature, there are numerous examples of a careful co-existence of quasi-egalitarian and hierarchical relations within the pastoral domestic economy. It is possible that such co-existence may correlate with greater variation in post-marital residence, greater proximity between affinal households, more balanced interaction with matrilineal and agnatic kin, and/or earlier division of inheritance<sup>14</sup>. However, I do not wish to postulate a simple causal relationship between kinship and its hierarchical organisation in daily life. By emphasising the characteristics of

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*elegenei holoon sain*” (Vreeland 1954:64).



local kinship, I suggest that pronounced patriarchal relations have a particularly strong foundation in Uyanga. The predominant kinship practices of virilocal marriage and distant matrilineal kin certainly do not dispute the position of the patriarch. Turning to an examination of quotidian social interactions among kin, the rest of this chapter will focus on how such pronounced patriarchy is produced within herding households.

### **The art of trickery**

Inspired by Goffmann's (1967) analytical approach to routinised interpersonal relations<sup>15</sup>, I will in this section consider interactions that may seem at first irrelevant to the production of patriarchy. My intention is to distance myself from other studies of patriarchy that approach gendered hierarchy as an overarching societal structure, seemingly divorced from the actions of the people living within it (see Introduction). Rather than equating patriarchy with a hegemonic structure, I will consider the seemingly 'uneventful' interactions that produce (intentionally or unintentionally) such relations of power. Specifically, I will examine how a selective audience can be captivated by persuasive lies. The social and linguistic mastery involved in skilful trickery ensures that lies remain unnoticed and thus retain their potential for enthralling the listeners; a capability that I argue is crucial and sometimes powerful.

In herding households, many daily hours are spent sitting around the stove, chatting with subdued voices. Such chatting often involves female members of the *ail*, but men also regularly take part. Anyone sitting far from the speaker is left with only an inaudible whisper, and despite eager exclamations, the speaker is likely to continue the exclusive conversation. Gossip about drunken relatives, lucky gold miners and stray animals is circulated, and minor details are discussed at great length. However, although any topic makes for good conversation, the communication of gossip does not take place at random. Indeed, in these daily interactions, significance is not primarily given to *what* is being said, but rather *how* it is being communicated and, most importantly, to *whom*. If the speaker has only received the attention of a younger female sibling, someone else is certain to cut in and take over the conversation. On the other hand, if the main speaker has secured the oldest male sibling's attention, if not the all-important attention of the father, no one will disrupt the speaker. By turning people into listeners, the speaker establishes him or herself as someone who

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<sup>14</sup> I do not intend to imply that such kinship practices are necessarily related. Indeed regional studies (in particular the 'Environmental and Cultural Conservation in Inner Asia' project) show a great degree of variation in how such practices interrelate.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Nathaniel Daniels for bringing Goffmann's work to my attention.

claims knowledge, as ‘someone who knows’ (*medemhii*). Furthermore, by excluding others the speaker not only lays claims to knowledge, but also consolidates his or her position as an exclusive conveyor of knowledge.

As my language skills slowly improved during fieldwork, I became increasingly focused on the spoken word and strove to write down casual conversation in my field notes. However, in doing so I soon realised the great extent to which people lied. Statements, spoken by the same person at different times, were contradictory; claims about local matters were negated by real events and I became increasingly confused about how to interpret this casual conversation.

Whilst ‘lying’ tends to carry morally charged Western connotations, I will here examine the practice of trickery as a form of communication that is not necessarily subject to moral evaluations. Based on my observation of practical and discursive interactions among people in Uyanga, I consider a lie to be a statement that is knowingly false. Since the practice of trickery can remain discursively as well as grammatically unmarked<sup>16</sup>, the audience as well as the anthropologist may have difficulty eliciting the intentions of the speaker. As a result, my analysis does not attempt to delineate the extent to which such lies are spoken deliberately, but rather considers the significance of a speaker’s ability to captivate an audience with statements that move within and beyond deceitfulness.

Fabricated stories and deceitful statements constitute much of daily conversation between all members of the *ail*. Whilst such lies may concern seemingly unimportant details, they may equally be dramatic and grave. Although particular skills are rarely taught explicitly, as I will discuss later in this chapter, I occasionally witnessed how children were instructed in lying well. As children became better at speaking, they increasingly practised lying. However, their lying skills were so poor that it was obvious to all members of the *ail* that their statements were lies. In return for communicating such noticeable lies, they would either get a few slaps or be ridiculed by the audience. The importance of being a good trickster was thus emphasised daily in children’s unskilful attempts. One day as we were chatting by the stove, a family member pulled one of the children aside. She whispered something to the child and asked for it so be said loud. When the child recounted the lie, one of the other present protested that it was a lie. The child then repeated the statement with a straight face, not giving the audience any clues as to the deceitfulness of the

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<sup>16</sup> In Mongolian language there are no evidential markers such as a suffix, verb case or other.

statement. As the conversation continued unabatedly, the family member who instructed the lie complimented the child affectionately for lying skilfully.

This teaching situation illustrates how trickery is an explicitly valued skill that has to be perfected. In learning how to lie, the challenge is to withstand the objections of the audience and allow the uncertainty to give the lie a longevity that lasts beyond its initial utterance. Listeners often interject: “you’re lying!” (*hudlaa yarj baina!*), “is it true?” (*ünen üü?*), “really?” (*tiimoo?*), whereupon the speaker invariably replies: “it’s true!” (*ünen shüü!*) or simply continues speaking. The speaker rarely admits that his or her statement was knowingly false, nor will the listeners press the issue beyond the few common interjections, even when the speaker is not present. Whilst such objections may seem to push for a disclosure of the epistemological status of the speaker’s statement, thus marking publicly the deceitfulness of the claims, I suggest that they instead emphasise a form of sociality where lies are expected to be an important part of conversation, even if they remain unmarked. Since speakers rarely reveal their lies publicly, the audience is seldom certain of what is a lie and what is not. However, it is this uncertainty, and the expected verbal creativity that it allows for, that asserts the social intimacy of the people present. The socially recognised appropriateness of objections from the audience and the speaker’s refusal to disclose his or her lies establishes and reinforces their shared sociality.

In addition to the social efficacy of lying in conveying inclusiveness, lies also contain the evocative power to captivate an audience. Since lies are unmarked at the instance of their utterance and remain so during the subsequent objections and later evaluations, I suggest that a lie is spoken in such a way that it will continue to give the speaker attention regardless of what knowledge is communicated. To lie is thus not only an assertion of in-depth familiarity with and knowledge of the issue under discussion and its potential for further unnoticeable lies, but is also a way of creatively extending claims to knowledge. In a situation where new topics of daily conversation are limited due to, among others, the remote location with infrequent visiting, lying enables greater participation in conversation. Also, a good liar can more easily acquire and maintain people’s attention with intriguing accounts that move eloquently in and out of deceitfulness. I therefore suggest that lies are resourceful building blocks for communication. Whilst to communicate is to be social, to lie successfully is in some ways the pinnacle of sociality<sup>17</sup>. In a highly hierarchical society, to trick others elegantly into listening attentively to the stated claims constitutes a basis for

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<sup>17</sup> In chapter 6 I elaborate on this point through a discussion of drinking practices, colloquially termed “fake drinking” (*hudlaa sogtuu*), where lying is used strategically to confirm social affiliation.

elevating the speaker's status position, at least momentarily. The main speaker enjoys a position usually reserved for the patriarch such that all others are turned into listeners.

### **The power of indifference**

In order to fully appreciate people's discursive strategies for eliciting attention, I will now consider another aspect of the general discursive environment within which such strategies appear. In particular, I will examine the ways in which household members evade giving each other attention in everyday situations. By means of silence and indifference, people can ignore the physical and/or verbal presence of others. They thereby turn dialogues into monologues, desired interactions into isolated actions. Confronted with an overt wall of indifference, people struggle to get attention, whilst also taking part in the purposeful isolation of others. When attention is not given, a person is not only denied social interaction, but is also subjected to the power of others in their refusal to respond to the person's request. In this sense, to exclude someone can thus be as powerful a device as including someone. As people overtly show their indifference towards those who try to get attention, the daily struggle for attention involves peculiar creativity and apathy.

In my host families, all members of the *ails* are involved in intentionally excluding each other. Afternoon chats by the stove, communal meals in a *ger*, and evening films on TV provide informal domestic contexts for such household dynamics. At meal times, for example, household members (apart from those who are carrying out tasks far from the *ail*) gathered in our *ger* to take their meals. Since we only had one daily meal, it was usually a much-anticipated event. Hours before the meal was ready, my sisters and I started tenderising the dried meat, rolled out noodles, fetched water and eventually stoked the stove with plenty of dried yak dung. As the smoke started to rise tall in the chimney, people would return from their chores and gathered in hungry anticipation in our *ger*. Whilst waiting for the food to cook, they were served numerous bowls of fresh *süütei tsai*. It was in such situations that displays of indifference were particularly pronounced, as the following excerpt from my field notes describes:

As we were having lunch, a family member sat away from the table and wanted to pass a bottle back to us at the table. An elder sibling sat closest but didn't react at all to her words (*mai!*, *avch!*, *hüüsh!*). Even when she stretched her arm out right in front of the other's face in order to force him to take it, he didn't budge. With the elder sibling not reacting at all, she ended up throwing it on the floor. No one commented on it and eventually someone picked it up after we had finished eating.

As a large number of people are gathered in the enclosed and limited space of a *ger*, such communal domestic situations would seem to enable social interactions. Indeed, these situations do provide a much cherished forum for chatting, laughing, playing, and relaxing. However, it is amidst such caring and warm informality that explicit calls for attention are denied.

The youngest members of the *ail*, particularly girls, most frequently try to get attention, yet are also generally the most unsuccessful. Older male members, on the other hand, are less likely to react to someone's words or actions and simply look straight through the person. People rarely say, for example: "look at this", and if they do, they are even more certain to be overtly ignored. Such a statement presumes an interested listener who is willing to act according to the wishes of another person. To give attention in this sense is to give recognition to the other person whilst placing oneself in a position of compliancy. Recognising the reluctance to give attention, at times creative strategies are used. One day, for example, the youngest daughter in one of my host families pulled out a bag with leftover fabric from the storage boxes (*avdar*). Whilst she did not start to sew or use the fabric in other recognised purposeful ways, she merely emptied the bag for its contents and then slowly refilled it again. As she fiddled with it noisily, she let go of several loud and excited outbursts. Following each exclamation she quickly and seemingly discretely glanced at the people around. When no one reacted, she put the bag away and tried another strategy. Having tried strategies ranging from leftover fabric and Chinese clothes labels to peculiar shaped dung and badly bruised knees, it seemed clear that the girl's aim was not tied to the particular medium she used, but rather a more general quest for attention (cf. Humphrey 1978).

Complaints about health-related issues are often used in a similar fashion. During my first winter of fieldwork I was shocked to hear of so many illnesses, ailments and general discomforts: stomach aches, blistered hands, stiff backs, calloused toes, sore throats, low blood pressure, dizziness, liver swellings and kidney pains, to name but a few. Life on the steppe is hard on one's physical well-being, and concerns about health take up a large part of daily conversation. As ideas about health involve multiple and intersecting views on the human condition, including fears of black magic (*har dom*), the process of diagnosis is extensive and of great importance. As such, situations involving failing health might seem particularly conducive to attracting attention. However, whilst lasting health complaints were generally taken seriously by my host fathers, everyday health complaints were subject to the same overt indifference as described above. When I or others occasionally responded to someone's complaints about his or her condition, an almost inverse scenario played

out. Instead of intentionally ignoring the person, everybody suddenly assembled and seemed to compete to give the person attention. A bruised hand was held by as many people as possible, clinging close to the person, expressing their concern. Whilst to show indifference can be a powerful tool of exclusion, it is entirely relational and thus depends on the situational actions of the others present. Once others arrive and give attention, a person showing indifference no longer isolates anyone but him or herself. In this sense, the idiosyncratic strategies of indifference and the particular interactions they engender overtly produce and negotiate the hierarchical dynamics of household relations.

### **Learning situations**

In this section I will examine processes of learning where the possessor of a desired skill refuses to pass it on to the learner. My aim is to show that by excluding others from acquiring not only attention, but also skills and knowledge, people fervently assert their own status position in face of potential competition. By being denied skills, a person is prevented from carrying out daily work and is labelled lazy (*zalhuu*) and incapable (*medehgüi hün*) by others. However, it is not simply the ability to work, but rather to be the only one or one of the few who can carry out a particular task (i.e. specialisation), which significantly increases a person's status. In being singled out and given the responsibility for a particular task, ordained by the household head, a person demands respect and recognition from all others. Responsibility is an accomplishment of a person's skills, conveying status in relation to others with an inferior command. Pride becomes a public statement of singular achievement, especially when a person discusses the concerned task with the household head in the presence of other household members. The household head himself epitomises the significance of responsibility as opposed to merely carrying out commonly learnt tasks. Whilst he spends little time actually working, he makes all final decisions and ultimately shoulders all responsibility.

A common arena for displaying disregard for others is in learning situations where acquired knowledge and skills are demonstratively withheld from the learner. Regardless of whether the desired skill is necessary for herding life (such as milking, sewing and cooking) or not (such as cycling, learning English and Tibetan), the person possessing the knowledge and skills is likely not to share it. Generally, whilst the learner will not receive any instruction or advice from others, he or she will also be ridiculed and lightly physically punished by those who have acquired the ability to carry out the desired task. In this way, the learner is not only represented by others as incapable of a certain skill, but is also explicitly excluded by them from acquiring the desired knowledge. This does not mean that the learner will not learn the desired task but rather that the learning process

marks the learner as incapable. I suggest that the skills acquired by the learner are secondary to the others' display of him or her as incapable. Moreover, by visibly withholding desired skills from the learner, the authority of others is made manifest in the ridiculed incapability of the learner. The following entry from my field notes illustrates such a refusal to pass on skills:

Two female family members were making *huushuur* and this was the first time for one of them to roll out the dough. The eldest girl angrily scolded her younger sister again and again, repeatedly telling her: "you won't be able to do it!" (*chi chadahgüi!*), "how ugly!" (*yamar muuhai!*). The young girl's mood went from cheerful to bordering on crying. She looked down as she tried to roll out the small circles, struggling to make them evenly thick and round. She stood up and used all her weight, pressing down on the heavy dough. As a result, the circles became even more varied. The elder sister furiously grabbed the rolling pin from her and rolled out the dough herself in a few seconds. Upon returning the rolling pin to the young sister, she ordered her to roll out the next circle. The older sister never gave as much as one piece of advice nor demonstrated how to roll out the circles. Instead the scolding increased and became more directed to the rest of us: "she can't even do this!", "she can't learn!" (*surch chaddaggüi*). The oldest brother entered the *ger* and upon hearing the complaints about the young girl's failing abilities, he walked over and slapped his young sister lightly.

(Field notes)

In the above situation, the young girl had been asked by her mother to roll out the dough. She had entered the age when it is increasingly expected that she would be capable of rolling out dough for noodles, fried bread and dumplings, and her mother has started to encourage her to learn the skill. However, as the girl's sisters have had this domestic task to themselves and claimed responsibility, they are reluctant to include her in their task. The staple of homemade noodles, prepared every day, is a point of pride among the young girls who have perfected their own personal style. Whilst some roll the noodles thick and soft, others make them thin and hard. Upon eating a bowl of noodles, all members of the *ail* can easily discern who has rolled out the noodles that day. In this sense, the task of preparing noodles can be seen as a celebration of individual skill and perfection where the product reflects the labour and even character of a single person<sup>18</sup>. In carrying out daily tasks, household members thus carve out areas of specialisation that display their singular abilities and provide them with an identifiable role within the household group. Whilst some women excel in milking, others are better at preparing dairy products. Similarly among men, some are favoured for

breaking in horses, whilst others are respected rope-makers. If a person is particularly good at something, the household head may notice such achievements and compliment him or her with unmatched attention and personal rewards<sup>19</sup>. This special treatment means that skilled younger daughters may sometimes be able to enjoy more freedom from the household head's authority than comparatively less skilled brothers.

As household members compete for unique skills and the public recognition such skill-sets confer, I suggest they assert their singularity in the face of the non-negotiable status identifiers of age, gender and kinship position within the household. Since a person's age and gender are fixed in relation to those of other household members, his or her kinship position will only change upon marriage. By accumulating skills and responsibility, people can complement the non-negotiable status identifiers with highly personal achievements. Such acquired singularity does not contest the patriarchal relations, yet it serves to introduce other hierarchies of status identifiers that allow skilled individuals recognition and respect within the household despite their commonly accorded lower status.

During my fieldwork I found myself in almost constant and never-ending learning situations. I soon struggled with people's indifference towards me and their contempt for teaching me any practical skills. Since they were friendly, I initially thought that perhaps they saw me as an honoured guest who should not be working alongside them. However, before long I was ordered around by the host mother, telling me to milk the yaks, round up the goats, collect dung for the fire, prepare homemade noodles and many other chores that were utterly foreign and unknown to me. The tasks that seemed easy and straightforward, on the other hand, she would not let me carry out. I was only allowed to, and indeed ordered to do, all the tasks I did not know how to accomplish. As the wife of the household head, her position is by no means *sui generis* superior to other members, and if she desires authority, she must create its necessary conditions. Whilst the host mother appeared very submissive to her husband, she emphasised her authority over her children, daughters-in law and me. Paradoxically, while the household head made most decisions and shouldered all ultimate responsibility, it was the mother who most frequently and vocally exercised her power. That is, while she appeared to have relatively little decision-making power in relation to her husband, she asserted as much power as she could in contexts in which she was able to do so.

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<sup>18</sup> Unevenly cut noodles that are rolled out thick are for example commonly said to be made by a lazy woman, whereas evenly thin cut noodles are said to be made by a diligent, hard-working woman.

<sup>19</sup> Such rewards include being allowed to sleep in late, carrying out challenging tasks and receiving generous monetary handouts.



The above examples underline that within patriarchal power relations it is rarely the patriarch himself who primarily engages in the assertion of status within the household. Whilst the household head moves about his chores and duties calmly and quietly, other household members continually assert themselves vis-à-vis younger members. In extending the normative basis for status claims beyond that of the unequivocal and obvious identifiers of age, gender and kinship position, members of the household exercise their power over those who abide. However, although a person emphasises his or her autonomy and capabilities by excluding others through such incapacitating strategies as denying them attention and withholding skills, collective demands and expectations ultimately remain a daily reality.

### **The daughter-in-law**

Continuing my exploration of the multiple, cross-cutting interests that flow within patriarchal *ails*, in this section I examine the position of the daughter-in-law within household groups. Drawing on Humphrey's (1978, 1993b) work on the relationship between status and affinity, I will show how historical practices of and current frustrations with subordination to the in-marrying household do not express the repression of a wife, but rather a recognition of her feared potential for independence. A focus on the daughter-in-law allows for a more nuanced picture of the workings of patriarchy since affinal relations require an appreciation of not just the incorporation of a wife into the household, but also of the ways in which household groups interrelate through marriage. Whilst such an analytical shift is not new within kinship studies, it has been surprisingly underappreciated within studies of gender hierarchies. By analysing the significance of patriarchy for relations between household groups, this section will suggest that highly patriarchal *ails* engender potential threats to the stability of their affinal household groups.

Based on historical material, Humphrey (1993b) describes how in the Mongolian cultural region men married wives of higher status (hypogamy). According to Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]:241), marriage with higher status women in a patrilineal society constitutes a highly unstable structure, since political alliance is sought through affinal ties. This instability is based in the tension between a man's ties to affines and to agnatic kinsmen. If, instead, a man marries a lower status woman (hypergamy), her natal kin can either be ignored or used as clients, and thereby never pose a similar threat to the structural continuity of the wife-taking group. In Mongolia, hypogamy was practiced

for centuries<sup>20</sup> (Atwood 2004:314) and was part of a wider constellation of cultural values, integrating women into both material and religious aspects of the pastoral domestic economy. Reflected in myths and epics (see for example Hamayon 1987), wealthy fathers were not easily lured by young men's bridewealth propositions for their daughters and as a result intense and fearful bridal captures were a necessary recourse for marriageable men. Not only did the men have to subordinate themselves through the trials of acquiring a wife, but the wife was also accompanied by a dowry (*inj*) which remained her personal property. According to Humphrey, "the basic idea which is conveyed by the Ch'ing period law codes is that an adult woman should have rights to enough productive property to be able to live autonomously if widowed or divorced" (1993b:184). Given the structural instability of hypogamy and the practical tribulations through which Mongolian men acquired their wives, Humphrey concludes that, once married, the higher status wife necessarily became subject to intense regimes of subordination. It was only through her subordination that the agnatic kin group could reproduce itself without her posing constant threats to its perpetuity.

Such subordination involved an unparalleled long and hard working day, carrying out the same tasks over and over again, leaving her with little freedom to do anything else (Sokolewicz 1977). Also, as depicted in a still cherished Mongol epic, the father-in-law would present her with riddles to test her wit and cunningness, thereby making her act according to his terms of discursive interaction (Hamayon and Bassanoff 1973). Yet, in her everyday life, what required constant adaptation and loyal compliance was the extensive taboo (*tseer*) on her language, transforming her speech markedly from that of everyone else's. The daughter-in-law (*ber*) is

absolutely forbidden to use the names, either in address or reference, of her *xadamud* (her husband's older brothers, his father, his father's brothers, grandfather, etc.). The taboo includes the names of the wives of close *xadamud*. The *ber* is also prohibited from mentioning the name of her husband's patrilan. Furthermore, she is strictly enjoined not to use any word in ordinary language which enters any of the forbidden names or sounds like them (Humphrey 1978:91-92).

As the *ber* replaced the words and sounds of the patrilan members, her personalised speech not only reflected her wit but also ensured that she did not attract the attention of the person named, especially her father-in-law. Such attention was undesired within the kin group due to her disruptive

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<sup>20</sup> According to Atwood, hypogamy was still found among Buryats in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Atwood 2004:314). However, with the historically growing bilateralisation of kin ties in Mongolia (see in particular Szykiewicz 1977), such marriage-structures seem to be no longer preferred.

potential as an affine discussed above. Bringing with her a sizeable dowry, *ber* could potentially return to her natal family and even bring along her husband. Her threat to the father-in-law's household was thus not so much grounded in her own ambiguous feelings, but rather in her capacity to tempt her husband away. Since the inheritance of property went from father to son, a son was likely to grow impatient waiting for the transferral of leadership from brother to brother within the agnatic group after receiving his inheritance share. By investing in his nuclear family, conjugal sentiments were a direct challenge to the continuing authority of his agnatic kin group. The seed of the patriclan's destruction was thus contained within its own structure where the transferral of leaders and property were at odds. Conflicts between brothers fill Mongolian epics and accounted for even the infamous dissolution of the Mongol Empire. In order to avoid such a fate, the in-marrying *ber*, with her tempting autonomy, was marginalised verbally and ideologically through the extensive language taboo.

Whilst I have so far discussed historical material on the positionality of the *ber*, Empson (2003) illustrates clearly the potential for autonomy of daughters-in-law among today's Buryats of Northern Mongolia. She argues that being a daughter-in-law is a 'state of liminality' that is defined by recurring possibilities of separation and transformation. Whereas public rites integrate and transform women into loyal daughters-in-law, tensions occasionally mount and achieve full expression through the actions of the *ber* (see for example *ibid*:91-95). In her analysis of a rebellious daughter-in-law who decides to instigate temporary separation from her husband's kin group, Empson shows that a *ber* can "subtly *subvert* certain rules and maintain her position as not fully part of her husband's family while outwardly seeming to comply with her expected behaviour as a daughter-in-law" (2003:77, emphasis in original). Following Empson's stress on the subversive potential of the daughter-in-law, I will now return to Uyanga and consider the predicament of the *ber* in my host's household.

Although today's daughters-in-law in Uyanga are not subject to constant riddles or extensive language taboos<sup>21</sup>, they are however still considered an ambiguous, and indeed potentially disloyal, member of the *ail*. Although rows between *bers* and their husbands have become part of everyday life, the following excerpt from my field notes describes particularly well a daughter-in-law's own views of a tense situation. A row erupted after her husband had made a purchase she did not approve of and I later went by their *ger* to see if she was okay.

*Ber* was alone in the *ger* when I entered. She passed me a cup of tea and said: “I can’t believe he bought such garbage (*hog*). I told him to wait with any payment until I could come along too, but he didn’t listen to me. Why? He always thinks that he knows better (*ööröö ilüü sain medne gej bodoj baina*). You know, here with my parents-in law, my father-in law decides everything himself and my mother-in law accepts whatever he decides. She is so modest (*daruuhan*) and humble (*nomhon*). If they expect me to be like that, I just don’t know... I’ve now lived here for many years and it’s so hard!”

(Field notes)

As *ber* struggles to take up the expected subordinate position within her husband’s *ail*, she may ultimately return to her natal household. In that case, her husband (the first in line to inherit the leadership after his aging father) will either dissolve his nuclear family and let go of his son, or separate from his father’s *ail* and let down the patriclan that he had always been expected to carry on. Despite her daily hardship within the *ail*, it thus seems that *ber* fundamentally has a greater degree of autonomy and leverage than other members of the household group. Indeed, given the absence of the historical practices of subordination, *ber* can potentially escape the patriarchal burden and live away from her affines. If such a burden includes her husband, as the above statement indicates, it is not her emotional influence on her husband that primarily threatens her father-in-law, but rather her own autonomy. Given the previous discussion of the ways in which household members negotiate their status within patriarchal households, it thus seems that whilst daughters-in-law are allocated a markedly marginal and subordinate position, they are also able to challenge households in unique and powerful ways. Since a daughter-in-law not only has her dowry, but also a continuing influence on and emotional tie with her own father, the in-marrying household is forced to subtly negotiate her subordination. Although ideologically the daughter-in-law has severed her ties with her natal kin group, she can challenge her affines by practically drawing on the persisting strengths of such ties.

Whether in historical hypogamous households or in Uyanga’s current patriarchal households, fathers only reluctantly marry off their daughters. Once a girl marries, the expectation is for her to reside with her husband’s family and interaction with her natal household becomes limited. As a result, fathers give their daughters large dowries to ensure their future prosperity as well as to enable their possible return in case of divorce<sup>22</sup>. In this sense, instability is not only generated at the

<sup>21</sup> In my host families, communication between daughter-in-law and father-in-law was markedly rare, and it was considered inappropriate of her to address her father-in-law by name.

<sup>22</sup> Following recent changes to marital law, more than 2000 divorces are being registered annually. The majority of officially registered divorces are among people living in urban areas.

level of the wife-giver's superior status, but also within highly patriarchal households. As patriarchs extend their power and position through elaborate dowries, in-marrying daughters-in-law can pose a great threat to the stability of affinal households. When incorporating a daughter-in-law into an *ail*, her father will therefore always be present in the dowry. Whilst on the one hand, a daughter-in-law may seem to have greater leverage within her husband's *ail*, on the other, such leverage is the mirror-image of her own father's persona and power. Affinal relations between patriarchal household groups are in this sense inevitably fraught with tension and distance to affines becomes a condition for the representation of the patriclan as an enduring social entity.

### **Tensions within the *ail***

Having discussed the potential instability involved in relations of affinity among patriarchal households, I will in this section consider the extent to which patriarchy may also be perceived as a burden by others than the *ber*. Although people seldom discuss openly their disagreements with decisions made within the *ail* and generally attempt to suppress troubled emotions, conflicts occasionally developed among household members during my fieldwork. I will here move beyond a focus on affinal relationships and illustrate how patriarchal relations within household groups relate to larger issues of socio-economic change. Whilst many household heads are strongly opposed to ninja mining and often state that they do not want any of their children to become miners, I will show how the daily experience of patriarchy may ultimately push them into ninja mining. As such, I will suggest that the positionality of the *ber* provides an immediate domestic model upon which other members of the household group can contemplate and possibly realise their own separation from the kin group.

Many household heads have made one particular decision that frequently stirs the equanimity of children: they had not been allowed to go to school. Although frustrated about not having been offered more book-based teaching, teenagers and young adults seem more preoccupied by their isolation from meeting potential spouses. Living in a remote mountainous region, the village school is the nexus for meeting non-relatives. Although children are obvious assets to the running of a herding household, there is not always much work for everybody to do. As younger children beg their father to be allowed to attend school, their requests are met with a wall of silence and disregard. Their statements are never engaged with and thus never become dialogue. By isolating children with their wishes, worries and thoughts, household heads solidify their position within *ails* as the ultimate authority on the allowed acquisition of skills.

Many herders living in the region have taken this stance and as a result the school has reputedly one of the highest rates of ‘left-out’ students in the country<sup>23</sup>. Officially, primary and secondary school education is free and dormitories are available at a low cost for herding children. However, in practice dormitories are so ill maintained that children cannot stay there during the winter when the teaching takes place. Furthermore, education is often an expensive investment for parents. Yet, the reason behind the numerous ‘left-out’ children among herders in the area is not merely economic. I suggest that the close correlation between the local school and ninja mining contributes significantly to the reluctance among household heads to enrol their children in state-provided education. During the school year many teachers take the pupils on excursions to the mining areas where the children work alongside their teachers. The pupils often give part of their earnings to the teacher, thus augmenting the salary of their teacher, whilst earning good pocket money for themselves. Also, during the summer vacation most pupils are involved in ninja mining to earn a cash-income necessary for keeping up with the expensive purchases of their classmates. The decision to not enrol children in the local school is likely to be an expression of the worry shared by many household heads that their children may become ninjas. Preventing children from attending school may thus be a statement of the concern experienced by household heads for their children, rather than the distanced, cold calculation it often seems to those affected.

The ability of household heads to prevent their children receiving education from the local school can be seen as an extension of their common, and possibly growing, role in arranging marriages. Since the local school is associated with meeting potential marriage partners, ‘left-out’ children are less likely to initiate relationships in secret and thus allow their father his expected involvement in finding a suitable spouse. As such, household heads can be seen to sacrifice their children’s education in order to ensure the stable reproduction of their kin groups, keeping at bay threats from both unsuitable spouses and unwanted ninjas. Preventing the disintegration of kin groups as well as herding livelihood, household heads forcefully assert their power at times when the continuity of the patriarchal unit is most clearly at stake. As many herding children are prevented local education and expected to marry the spouse of their father’s choice, school-attending children are associated locally with both ninja mining and the individual freedom to find their own spouse. The potholed, barren landscape of the mines is indeed a common metaphor used by herding patriarchs for the breakdown of herding society, its patrilans and loyal youths.

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<sup>23</sup> It is very difficult to get reliable, if any, statistical data on this issue since many residents in the district of Uyanga are not registered with the local administration.

The perceived association between the local school, ninja mining and ‘love marriages’ finds strong resonance in actual practices. In conversations with local youths, many stated that a ninja would be a preferred spouse. Although such a view may reflect the actual increasing interaction with ninjas, I suggest that it is also grounded in the association of ninjas with a life away from patriarchal herding households. This association is both symbolic and real. As I will discuss in chapter four, the sociality developed in the mines differs significantly from life on the steppe. One such difference is the fact that ninjas live in nuclear rather than extended household groups. By marrying a ninja, men and women relocate to the mines where they live in their own *ger*. Whilst brothers, sisters and other relatives might live in the same area, they rarely live or work together. As a result, the kinship practices common to herding life are challenged and even altered in the mines. The potential threat posed by affinity to patriarchal patrilines is intensified in the mines, and the usual subordination of wife and children becomes a nostalgic relic of historical epics and elders’ reminiscence.

Although many herders marry ninjas and thereby become involved in mining, herders do not only relocate to the mines through ties of affinity. In Uyanga, herders married to herding wives at times move temporarily to the mines, with or without their wives and children. Such temporary involvement in ninja mining is rarely a joint decision between household head and the person(s) in question, but rather erupts from fierce disagreements within the *ail*. Given the daily experience with patriarchal relations, such radical departures for the mines are likely to be inspired by the more general cultural values placed on self-reliance and competence, as well as lay interpretations of Buddhist teachings on, for example, *karma* and self-referential individuality (Humphrey, forthcoming). I suggest that disputes with household heads and desires to break away from kin groups are also expressions of autonomy that are modelled on the immediate experience of the challenging autonomy of in-married daughters-in-law within herding households. That is, affinity provides both an actual and ideological template for the involvement of herders in ninja mining. The burden of patriarchy might tempt its stout members to entertain the idea of leaving behind the hierarchical kin group. However, although artful trickery, overt indifference and reluctant teaching may engender explicit hierarchical relations, they also provide a warmth and inclusiveness that few desire to be without.

## Conclusion

In Weber’s discussion of ‘patriarchalism’, he identifies dowry practice as one of the most significant obstacles to the continuing authority of a patriarch (Bendix 1998:333). Weber shows how “the master’s authority over his household” (Weber 1968:1006) allows for an ideal type of

traditional authority that ties household members close together through filial respect and mutual obligation<sup>24</sup>. However, as the household grows and its ties extend far beyond it, the patriarch is confronted with an increasing challenge to enforce the subordination of his member subjects without igniting their collective uprising against him. By dividing up his property and passing parts of it on through daughters' dowries, the patriarch risks prioritising his own interests beyond those of his other (in particular male) subjects. The transferral of property through dowries therefore constitutes a fundamental tension for the continuing legitimacy of the patriarch's power.

In this chapter I have shown how dowry practice is indeed central to a daughter-in-law's potential for autonomy when living within a patriarchal household that demands her daily subordination. However, whilst Weber focuses on the dowry as a perilous alienation of property from a patriarch's other household members, I have described how the dowry remains within the daughter-in-law's natal kin group and thus enables the reproduction of a strong and enduring patriarchal unit. Rather than challenging the authority of a patriarch, the dowry practice in Uyanga serves to reinforce his authority whilst undermining that of his affines. As a result, although patriarchal authority is legitimised within the household, part of this power is asserted outside the household. In order to understand the ways in which patriarchy is produced and reproduced within households, it is thus necessary to appreciate the significance of relations within as well as beyond the household. Such relations not only concern affinity, but indeed the more general socio-economic changes with which patriarchy is constantly interacting, adapting and responding.

By examining the diverse discursive strategies of inclusion and exclusion that household members use to negotiate their relative status position within the *ail*, I have in this chapter shown how patriarchy is a dynamic form of social organisation. Rather than produced singularly by the household head, its production and contestation involves all members of the household. As such, patriarchy is far from the monolithic societal structure that appears in feminist and post-structuralist approaches to gendered hierarchies (see Introduction). By recognising the multiple and cross-cutting interests that make up patriarchal relations, this chapter has argued that local patriarchy indeed contains within its own structure its greatest challenge: affinity. As daughters-in-law are incorporated into their husbands' households, patrilans anticipate their perpetuity through loyal descendants whilst frustrated kin are presented with an immediate model of potential autonomy.

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<sup>24</sup> Instead of deriving norms from bureaucratic rulings or an individual's charisma, Weber describes how "under patriarchal domination the norms derive from tradition: the belief in the inviolability of that which has existed from time out of mind" (Weber 1968:1006). He considered patriarchal domination a primary form of the decentralised patrimonial domination and the patrimonial state.



Faced with the new economic practices of ninja mining, local herding household heads strive to ensure that their children do not become ninjas, thereby taking part in the perceived breakdown of patriarchal herding society and its enduring patrilines.

## Chapter 3: In search of autonomy

### Introduction

My host brother returned from a long day of herding in the late afternoon. He took a seat by the stove and relayed the latest news: “They have been there again today. The thieves (*hulgaich*). They have stolen dung (*argaal*) from the entire valley to the north and now there’s nothing left. I’m sure they are from the mining area. I saw the tracks from their large truck”. Mum interjected: “Oh no! Then what are we going to do this winter! What a disaster!” Dung thieves are a recent and increasingly common nuisance for herders on the steppe. However, they are not fined or in other ways penalised for their theft. In the countryside, land is held in common and herders claim usufruct rights to the areas where they usually take their herds<sup>1</sup>. This means that whilst the dung thieves are removing what herders perceive as theirs, such theft is considered marginal to both the law and its enforcement. Indeed, this legal grey zone (or, in practice, free zone) not only includes dung thieves, but also ‘wood thieves’ (*modny hulgaich*), ‘berry thieves’ (*jimsnii hulgaich*) and ‘nut thieves’ (*samryn hulgaich*).

According to eyewitnesses, dung thieves operate at night and arrive in large groups. They collect dung in twenty-five kg. bags and clean valleys in a matter of hours. The dung is used for household purposes or, alternatively, sold in the mining areas (*shoroony gazar*) and the village (*sumyn töv*) for 1500 *tügrüg* per bag (1.25 USD). Since miners and village dwellers have no animals and thus no ready fuel for their stoves, there are always buyers for the stolen dung.

As my host brother began speculating whether the perpetrators were acquaintances or perhaps distant relatives, everyone immediately expressed their discontent with his rationalisations: “Of course it’s not somebody we know...someone from Uyanga would never do something like that”. His parents then delivered the speech that I had soon become familiar with, as it was reiterated daily in one context or other:

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<sup>1</sup> See Sneath (2001) for a historical overview of ‘custodial’ rights to land-use in Mongolia and Sneath (2002) for a discussion of how such Mongolian notions of rights over land clashed with the development discourses on land privatisation in the 1990s.

“The thieves were strangers (*gadny ulsuud*). People we don’t know, people who have come from other places. It’s only strangers who show such complete disregard (*ogt toohgüi*) for other people. That’s the problem with strangers; you can never trust them (*tedend yeröösöö itgej chadahgüi*). Oh, such a difficult life! In the mines there are so many strangers. That’s why they do what they please. They drink, they fight, they only think of themselves. It’s so dangerous (*ayultai*) with all these strangers<sup>2</sup>”.

When people in the herding and mining areas comment on how dangerous the mines are, they usually use the idiom of ‘strangers’. These strangers are represented as non-individualised others who are devoid of recognisable social links. In referring to ‘dangerous strangers’ people engage in a narrative that sets up a strict division between ‘those we know’ and ‘those we don’t know’. Such a bifurcation is rhetorically powerful in conveying social distance between the speaker and the assumed perpetrators, whom are mapped onto a moral landscape of mutual exclusion. As herders in this way construct the mines as the social and moral opposition to life on the steppe, they represent ninjas as lacking any form of social relations with known others. The mines thus come to appear as socially isolated islands of unknown immoral others, existing beyond the tightly knit network of kinsmen in which herders take part<sup>3</sup>.

In order to understand why herders espouse this ideology of strangers, I will in this chapter examine the kinds of social relationships that are forged with and within the mines. Acknowledging the eagerness with which ninjas cultivate friendships, I will argue that in the mining areas a form of sociality is generated that is indeed distinct from that of the steppe.

In the first part of the chapter I show how the physically distinct areas of the steppe and the mines are closely interrelated through economic, ecological, social and other ties. Describing the relationship between ninja mining and the kin networks of three individuals, I demonstrate that the close social proximity of mining necessarily incorporates and implicates local herders, regardless of their moral stance vis-à-vis ninjas. As herding and mining overlap in such symbiotic, yet conflicting ways, I consider in the second part of the chapter how ninjas achieve the desired separation from their extended kin groups discussed in the previous chapter. By examining practices of spousal violence, friendship and joking, I show how a central aspect of ninja sociality is characterised by attempts to achieve individual autonomy and independence. As such, this chapter is concerned with the ways in which ninjas distance themselves from the burden of herding patriarchy.

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview an elderly female herder in Uyanga similarly remarked: “We are invaded by outsiders. It has become almost like Ulaanbaatar city!” (*Gadny uls l odoo ezelchisen. Tegeed odoo barag Ulaanbaatar hot bolloo!*)

## Situating ninja mining

In this section I will provide an overview of the economic relationship between ninja mining, herding and village life. In order to better understand the frustrations and concerns that herders raise about ninjas, as described in the opening vignette, it is necessary to convey the scale and relatively sudden presence of ninja mining in the area. Rather than conceiving of the mines as divorced from life on the steppe and in the village, this section underscores the mutual economic interests and numerous other links connecting miners, herders and villagers.

Up until a decade ago the landscape of Uyanga was said to have numerous lakes, large rivers and dense forests. According to older herders, the grass was so tall that small newborn lambs could run across the steppe, hiding in the grass without being seen. As an elderly man remarked: “this valley used to be ever so beautiful with tall flowers and grass. When I used a sickle (*shimeeseg*) I could easily prepare a whole truck of hay. But now there is almost no grass, so we have to use our hands and we can gather just one or two sacks of hay. You can’t even use a sickle anymore!” Although such reminiscences may be romanticised products of nostalgia and age, they correspond to observable physical changes to the landscape: indentations in the ground coloured by collected mineral deposits from past lakes and river banks that rest high above today’s rivers. Also, old photographs reveal far-reaching forests and lush grasslands where there today is only barren steppe.



**Figure 3: Dried-out river**

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<sup>3</sup> The Mongolian hospitality commonly shown to ‘those we don’t know’ is described by Lattimore on page 163.

Ten years ago, just before the outset of the gold rush, the village mainly consisted of a couple of small shops, a school with about four hundred pupils, a bathhouse (*haluun usny gazar*), a telephone station (*holboo*) and a hospital. These amenities constituted the village centre, which was surrounded by rows of small wooden houses enclosed by wooden fences. Since many families had animals grazing just outside the fenced off properties, they were almost self-sufficient in terms of dairy and meat products and only occasionally made purchases from local shops. Seemingly far away from the village was the local Buddhist monastery (*Uyangiin hiid*). It was rebuilt on the grounds of a large and renowned monastery destroyed during the socialist period. The river Ong flowed right by the monastery and, according to water statistics and accounts of local people, the river was almost one meter deep with a current so strong that river crossings were limited to passage via a wooden bridge. In addition to the long-standing local carpentry industry<sup>4</sup>, which employed many villagers, there was also a cheese factory, opened by a Swiss company in the early 1990s. However, both businesses closed down completely by 1999, leaving many villagers without prospects for an alternative income<sup>5</sup>.

As early as 1940, Soviet researchers had identified significant gold deposits in Uyanga (Erel Kompani 1994:28) and further detailed geological surveys were carried out in the area almost every subsequent decade. As opposed to the hard-rock gold deposits of Northern Mongolia that require a considerable investment of time and effort for its exploration<sup>6</sup> (Murray and Grayson 2003:45-48), the gold in Uyanga is found in placer deposits, that is:

deposits which originated elsewhere and at a later stage ended up 'placed' in their locations, mainly by movement of water, but also by movement of wind and sand. Since they are relatively younger than their matrix, they are not geologically integrated with it and hence relatively easy to extract (Stemmet 1996:8).

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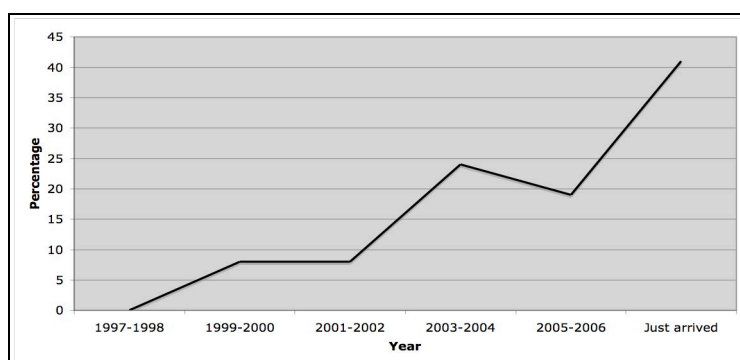
<sup>4</sup> Uyanga is famous for its '*geriin mod*' (the decorated wooden structure of a *ger*, such as the roof hole, the central vertical roof supporters, the roof poles and the door) as well as its *ger* furniture (such as small tables, chairs, chests of drawers and altar pieces). As opposed to the neighbouring regions, the carpentry of Uyanga used to be much more delicately carved and colourfully painted; the chief motif being idyllic lakes surrounded by forested volcanoes with ample game, representing the *Naiman Nuur* (Eight Lakes) not far from the village.

<sup>5</sup> During the socialist period there was also a herding collective (*negdel*) in Uyanga but it was gradually dismantled in the early 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> In Mongolia most of the hard-rock gold deposits are found in quartz veins, amenable to surface mining or trenching. Using sledgehammers, chisels and at times explosives, the gold-bearing quartz vein is removed and smashed into smaller lumps. The crushed ore is then milled and mercury is often added in order to create a gold-mercury amalgam. By heating up the amalgam, the gold is finally recovered (see Tumenbayar et al. (2000) for a discussion of mercury-pollution in Mongolia).

This particular geological formation of gold requires only minimal technology for its extraction, a small labour force, and yet provides a relatively high yield of gold. As such, significant returns can be generated with only minimal investment. However, it was not until after the collapse of the socialist regime that mining operations were initiated in Uyanga. In 1990 the Mongolian mining company Erel received government approval (Erel Kompani 1994:21) to begin mining not far from the village in an area where extensive explorative geological surveys had located large gold placers. Mining exploration started in 1993 in the Öltiin Gold Placer, located five kilometres west of the village. Crossing the wooden bridge, the placer runs through the valley adjacent to the river. As the gold mining company worked its way up the valley, ninjas moved in and started panning the company's tailings for leftover gold<sup>7</sup>.

According to a comprehensive report carried out by non-governmental organisations, ninja mining in Mongolia started in 1995-1996 in three areas, one of which was Uyanga (MBDA 2003:25). As the three areas are not within proximity of one another, the gold rush “appears to have been by a series of several spontaneous outbreaks, rather than spreading from a single initial outbreak” (ibid.:25). The report suggests that these early ninjas were experienced miners who had previously worked for state mining companies. As the companies closed, these unemployed miners had the technical knowledge to begin small-scale, low investment informal mining activities. Attracting people with diverse professional backgrounds from across the country, ninja mining grew quickly in Uyanga and became recognised locally as a gold rush (*altny hiirhel*) in 1999-2000. As the chart below illustrates<sup>8</sup>, people began moving to the mines around the millennium and although the relative population growth slowed down slightly in 2005-2006, it has grown continually and forcefully ever since ninja began in the area.

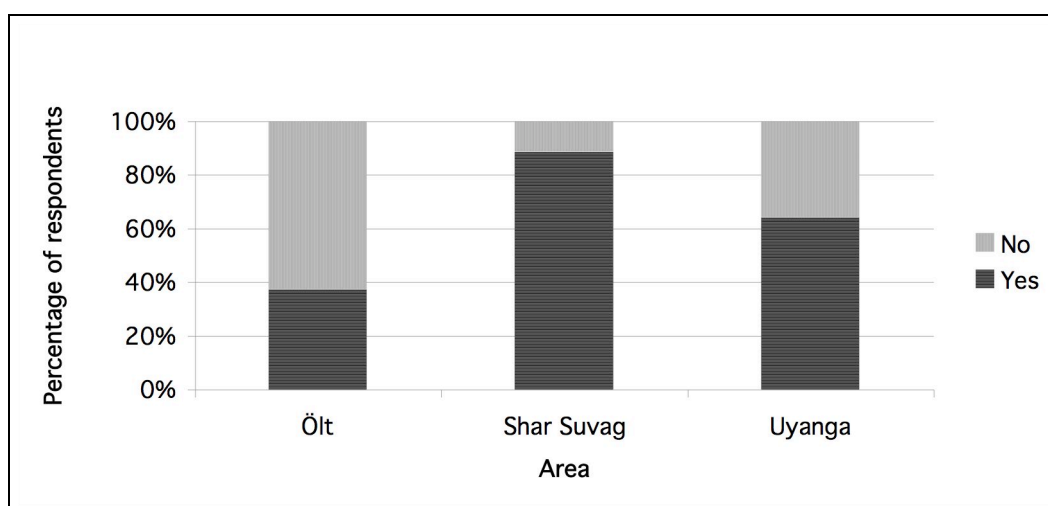


**Chart 1: Relative population growth in the mines of Uyanga**

<sup>7</sup> Several gold placers in Mongolia also contain platinum and, according to Murray and Grayson (2003:26), these are expected to become major exploration targets for informal miners in the future.

<sup>8</sup> The charts in this book are based on a survey with 43 representative respondents that I carried out in late 2006.

Thousands of people mined for gold in the same valley as the Erel company. As the concentration of gold in the tailings of the lower valley began to decrease, ninjas slowly made their way further up the placer, following the direction of the mining company's operations. However, when ninjas encroached on the licensed territory of the company, many were evicted by security guards and local police. Whilst many ninjas to this day continue panning for gold on the Öltiin Gold Placer (from now on Ölt), others began prospecting for gold in the neighbouring valley Shar Suvag. According to ninjas, this placer has a lower concentration of gold and full-time ninjas are rarely seen mining here. However, since the gold deposit is described as running at a maximum depth of only about six to eight meters, compared to sixteen to eighteen meters in Ölt, the placer is highly desirable for winter mining when the ground is frozen and digging becomes near impossible. At such times, ninjas burn tyres to soften the ground and use blowtorches to melt the water; techniques that are relatively costly, time-consuming and detrimental to the workers' health. Apart from seasonal switches between the placers, short-term and inexperienced ninjas also tend to start at Shar Suvag before moving to the more demanding but potentially more profitable Ölt. Whilst there is much continuity between the two mining areas in terms of historical development and seasonal mining activities, there is a stark contrast in their population density and relative intensity of social interactions. In Shar Suvag the population of approximately one thousand ninjas is predominantly made up of nuclear families, living relatively peacefully and quietly together, whereas in Ölt, hosting approximately seven thousand miners, the atmosphere is markedly tense and confrontational<sup>9</sup>. The difference between the areas is also reflected in people's evaluation of their current livelihood as depicted in the chart below.



**Chart 2: Satisfaction with current livelihood**

<sup>9</sup> Given the significant degree of variation both within the areas and over time, these estimates have to be considered as rough indications only.

Since ninjas have no animals in the mines, they are largely dependent on monetary transactions to acquire foodstuffs. Early in the morning herders arrive on Russian motorbikes, dressed in *deels* and black leather boots, shouting out the dairy goods of the day: “*süügee avaarai!*”. In order to have enough milk to make the daily *süütei tsai*, a ninja household of about five members buys a minimum of half a litre of milk each day. Due to the ninjas’ situation of dependence, herders sell one litre of milk for 500 *tügrüg* in the mines, whereas they can sell the same amount of milk for only 400 tg. in the village. Families with large herds generally sold about 50 litres of milk to ninjas every other day, thus generating approximately 25’000 tg. during the fertile summer months of July and August. A similar quantity of milk would sell for 20’000 tg. in the village, but since supply by far outstrips demand, such sales are less likely. Many herding families live near the village in order to be close to the school for their children, and given their more frequent interaction with village dwellers, they have an advantage in supplying milk to the shops owned by their friends and relatives. This means that herders living far from the village are rarely able to sell their milk in the village. However, following the advent of ninja mining and the creation of a new market, it has become increasingly possible for rural herders to also sell their milk. The sale of milk to ninjas has indeed become central to the herding economy, which also benefits from the occasional sale of meat to ninjas. Herders, both young and old, therefore often speak gratefully of how ninja mining has brought a new lucrative market to the area. I will later return to the issue of how this close economic tie between herders and miners is related to the ideology of strangers, with which I opened this chapter.

As a result of the intensity of gold mining activities only five kilometres from the village, it is hardly surprising that the population of the village has exploded alongside a tremendous expansion in its services. The village has grown considerably, with rows of wooden houses extending for kilometres from the monastery to the bridge across the river Ong. With neither plumbing nor a sewage system in place, the local government has extended the village area by creating new housing lots further away from the village centre and by building a new well. Also, as the small school could not accommodate the rising number of pupils, a new larger building has been constructed. Since the number of entrants continues to rise, the new school building has already become too small and teachers complain about serious capacity problems. A local teacher described to me how the school building, intended for 400 pupils, now has about 1500 enrolled pupils. With almost fifty pupils in each class and a shortage of both tables and chairs, teaching has become an increasingly difficult task. The public provisioning of houses and services is under severe pressure



as a result of the fast growing population of the village, many of whom are recent in-migrants to the village<sup>10</sup> (see tables below containing official census data from the National Statistics Office).

1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
7379	7549	7649	8010	9764	no data	no data	10510

**Table 1: Total population of Uyanga district (*sumyn niit hün am*)**

1995	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
1196	1354	1354	1451	1674	no data	no data	3627

**Table 2: Population of the village (*sumyn tövün hün am*)**

Whereas the officially recorded population of the village in 2006 was 3627, the actual population is commonly estimated to be in excess of five thousand. The inaccurate census-taking is evident and contributes to the inadequate allocation of state funds to the region.

Although ninja mining does not generate increased public sector income, it does facilitate high personal spending. Dozens of new restaurants and shops have opened in Uyanga. Most of them are located near the village marketplace where anything from Mongolian vegetables, clothes from China to Russian sweets and alcohol is sold. Gold is bought and sold, mining equipment purchased, a motorbike fixed or a jeep ride arranged. The village centre is full of life and business. With the recent erection of mobile phone masts, villagers eagerly discuss the advantages and downfalls of competing offers from mobile phone companies. Although, at the time of my fieldwork, few villagers used computers, successful mining families are starting to buy computers themselves. Positioned centrally in their houses, computers are certain to be noticed and become an immediate topic of conversation and an impressive sign of wealth.

Whilst the influx of money has given rise to noticeable wealth and increased consumption, it has also magnified social problems such as drinking and violence. Bottled vodka (75 cl.) can be purchased from village shops for as little as 700 tg. and illegal undiluted industrial alcohol (*sprit*) is occasionally available in some shops. Alcohol is readily available at all times of the day at prices kept below the nationally imposed levels. In the evening, when some villagers return from the

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<sup>10</sup> Up until 2004 it was required of citizens to possess a correct identity card for the district within which they lived. Moreover, fees and taxes were required when moving temporarily or permanently to other districts. Ratifying the Mongolian Human Rights Programme and its clause 2.1.6.1. (State Great Hural of Mongolia 2003), these restrictive practices have now been abolished. Although the aim was to allow for a more flexible allocation of federal funds, this does not seem to have happened. Instead, a greater proportion of funds now seems retained within the capital city (Narantuya 2007).

mines, bottles of vodka are passed around and loud brawls and fistfights often follow. Bloody faces, swollen eyes and torn clothes have become a common appearance, and intense alcohol consumption indeed appears to be taking over village life.

Whereas the mines are tangible places, localised in a couple of valleys, it is important to recognise that a similar circumscription does not apply to the miners working there. As they go about their daily lives, they might take up alternating jobs and residence, interacting with people dwelling locally or afar. 'A miner' is in this sense not a static and enduring label that necessarily excludes other professions. Instead, recognising the extent to which life in the mines, the village and on the steppe are mutually implicated through economic, ecological and social ties, I define miners as people who are involved in mining activities at a particular time. Such a temporal definition of occupation matches people's possible involvement in more than one kind of subsistence economy whilst also underscoring the importance of place in local cosmology, discussed in chapter five. The search for autonomy that I argue takes place in the mines is thus not carried out within a closed, static social sphere, but rather in highly transient and heterogeneous places.

### **Genealogies of miners**

In order to better understand how life on the steppe and in the mines are intrinsically interconnected, I will in this section focus on the significance of kin networks for the involvement of three individuals in ninja mining. My aim is to convey the ways in which such networks socially implicate people who have taken up different moral attitudes and practical approaches to the new ninja mining economy.

In a herding *ail* there was an elderly woman who lived in her own *ger* with two of her sons. Her husband had passed away a few years earlier and she was left with a very small herd that hardly provided enough dairy and meat for their daily sustenance. She had eight children, the youngest twenty-six and the oldest forty-four. Since seven of her children were men, she should have enjoyed a comfortable old age in which the in-marrying daughters-in-law would carry out the hard domestic and herding tasks. However, all her sons were still unmarried and thus remained a burden on her household. To assist her, a relative had offered to let her stay in their *ail* for a while. Her animals were thus herded together with the herd of her host, and she and her sons helped with local herding tasks. Indeed, her host incorporated one of her sons into their household, referring to as him 'my son' (*minii hūü*), serving him meals in their *ger*, whilst also subjecting him to the expectations and awarding him the obligations of a son.

In the morning the elderly woman milked her own yaks, prepared her own meagre amount of *öröm*, *aruul* and *süütei tsai*, and always took her meals in her own *ger*. Whereas the *ger* of her host was a standard five-wall *ger*, decorated with beautifully painted furniture and luxury items, her *ger* was a little four-wall *ger* with hardly any furniture. She had no electricity, no table and no chairs. In her presence, the host's wife often reminded us that "*ter yaduu baina*". Someday, one of her sons left for the mines where his younger sister and some of his brothers already worked. After her son had stayed in the mines for more than a month without sending any message home to his mother, the elderly woman started to grow increasingly concerned. One late afternoon she began telling me about her worries: "My son is a good person. He has a good heart, but people sometimes treat him badly. They hit him, they trick him, they do bad things to him. And because he likes to drink, I just don't know how he's doing. I'm worried about him...". With no money, the elderly woman could not afford the petrol necessary for taking her the twenty kilometres to the mines where most of her children now made a living. Instead, she remained on the steppe, blaming ninja mining for the many worries in her life.

Another herder had a much more direct and self-initiated relationship with the mines. He was a young proud herder who had married a girl from an area several hours away. Upon getting married, the couple moved into their own new *ger* within his father's *ail*. They soon had their first child, and with a view to inherit a substantial part of his father's herd, he often contemplated his bright future as a successful herder like his father. However, he was impatient and soon grew discontent with the monotonous herding life. Since he was five years old, he had lived in the village for six months of the year to attend school. All his friends were either in the village or in the mines, and he was eager to join them. His parents-in-law ran a meat-shop in the mines and one day he left with them to begin ninja mining whilst his wife and child stayed behind in his parents' *ail*<sup>11</sup>.

The young herder returned to the *ail* every couple of weeks, bringing back money and goods for his parents and wife. However, his mother always complained about him not working hard enough. In contrast, his wife happily and gratefully received whatever he brought home and she appeared to cherish every moment they had together as a family. As soon as he returned to the mines, she started worrying about possible accidents or fights that he might encounter. As the months progressed, the time between his visits grew longer and he started to bring his ninja friends along on

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the tendency of herders to not follow patrilineal ties to the mines. Indeed, in many cases herders follow matrilineal ties when moving to the mines. As I will discuss later in the chapter, upon arriving in the mines they do not necessarily live and work with their relatives.

his home-visits. Late, rowdy drinking sessions were held in his *ger*, forcing his wife and child to temporarily relocate to his parents' *ger*. On the few occasions when both he and his parents-in-law returned from the mines and took part in the daily herding activities, it seemed as if he and his wife finally found common ground. However, such occasions rarely lasted long and his returns to the mines were invariably accompanied by his wife's pleas for him to stop mining for gold.

The third brief life history concerns a herder who was also interested in ninja mining. His family-in-law lived in the mines and his wife had, prior to getting married, spent several months working as a ninja. However, his father took a strong moral stance against mining and refused to let any of his children become ninjas. His father even refused to sell any milk or meat to ninjas, and rather sold it in the village for a lower price. He, however, decided to sell the milk from his wife's yaks in the mines and his trips became increasingly frequent. Although he insisted that they needed the extra money, he always seemed to spend most of the money in the mines and only returned with a handful of cookies and other sweets. In the mines he had built up a large network of friends who not only bought his milk, but also invited him for meals and drinks.

A few months later, he began airing the idea of moving to the mines. Casually remarking on the great profits of local ninjas, he turned daily conversation from an insistent critique of ninja mining into a curious, yet sceptical enquiry. One day he entered our *ger*, sat by the stove and told his parents about his plan: his wife and child would stay behind in the *ail* and take care of the herd whilst he would go to the mines for a month to do ninja mining. An uproar ensued whereby his father made it clear that such an idea would never materialise with his approval. Until this day the herder has not extended his visits to the mines beyond the summer trips to sell milk.

By recounting the different ways in which these three people are related to ninja mining, I hope to have shown that, although the steppe and the mines are distinct physical places, their inhabitants are not similarly confined. As people move between areas and assert their temporally shifting involvement in herding and mining, the striking physical separation is transcended and the two areas are brought into intense social proximity. Indeed, even when people take a strong moral stance against ninja mining, their position within kin networks necessarily links them to the mines. With sons and daughters, husbands and wives working in the mines, herders on the steppe live with a daily reality which is not only economically but also socially shaped by the new economy of ninja mining. Regardless of people's views and actions, herding and mining have come to form an indissoluble whole.

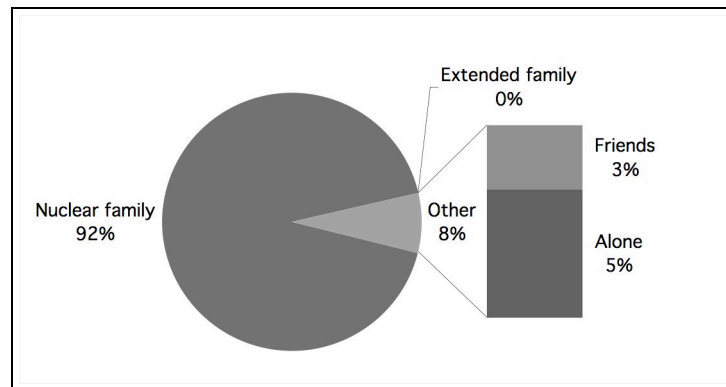
## Kinship in the mines

Given the extent to which herders and miners are mutually implicated through extensive kin networks, the rest of this chapter will consider how miners distance themselves socially from patriarchal households and produce a sociality marked by quests for individual autonomy. Rather than assuming that the physical relocation from the steppe to the mines contains *sui generis* such an emancipating capacity, I will first examine the implications of the altered kin relations within nuclear ninja families for assertions of authority.

In the mines of Uyanga, threats, acts and rumours of violence abound. Often sparked by intoxication, aggressive voices can be heard both day and night, and men and women alike can be seen involved in the common intimidation, drunken brawls and violent fist fights. Although violence is common between ninjas, it rarely occurs in interactions with people who live outside the mining areas. Even though herders and villagers have a regular presence in the mines and arrive there with the explicit purpose of interacting with ninjas, respectful language and friendly conversation characterise their dealings. Such peaceful relations might arise from the reluctance among ninjas to strain relationships with people on whom they are dependent for primarily the provision of foodstuff. However, the peaceful interactions are also likely to highlight differences in the social expectations that certain relationships engender. That is, whilst certain relationships allow for and may even anticipate violent interactions, other relationships render such violence inappropriate and unacceptable. Recognising such intense sociality in violence, I approach violence as intrinsically social rather than ethnographically divorced from the concerns and practices of everyday life. As Harris (1994) argues with regards to the Bolivian Andes, although the intoxicated state of the perpetrator may be a common cultural strategy to insist on the ‘otherness of violence’ and its unrelatedness to everyday life, such cultural apology should not be matched by a similar analytical reluctance to consider violence an essential part of everyday life (Harris 1994:59).

In the mines of Uyanga, ninjas generally live in nuclear household units comprising husband, wife and children (see chart below). During occasional visits to members of the husband’s kin group, the nuclear ninja family becomes guests to the kin group rather than being among the hosts<sup>12</sup>. Being thus positioned, visiting ninja families are granted respect according to the husband’s position within the kin group whilst, in turn, they are subjected to minimal obligations and expectations. When ninja nuclear families return to the mines, the recognition and respect, as well as the

obligations and duties that fall upon members living within the *ail* are attenuated and positioned marginally in relation to the many other everyday social relationships maintained in the mines.



**Chart 3: People with whom they moved to the mines**

As extended kin ties are marginalised in daily life, the extensive patriarchy of herding households that extend from the household head through the sons to their children is sharply reduced. Also, given the highly transient and heterogeneous ninja population, the ideology of agnatic relations does not have an enduring presence to the degree found in herding *ails*. Patriclans headed by proud patriarchs are not part of the experience of living in the mines. Neither husband nor wife is surrounded by numerous kinsmen to assert the continuation of a kin hierarchy. By not taking up the position as an in-marriage daughter-in-law in daily life, the ninja wife enjoys more autonomy within the ninja household. Indeed, she escapes the pressure of incorporation into kin hierarchies and her unfettered affinity can potentially grant her freedom from the expectations of subordination held especially by her husband's family. As a result, kinship and affinity in ninja households do not exist so much in a prescribed, incontestable hierarchical relationship.

Indeed, with domestic authority not being held exclusively by male household heads, overt and violent negotiations of power seem to form a significant part of how ninja spouses relate to one another. I thus suggest that instead of living entirely beyond hierarchical relations, ninja nuclear families attempt to set up new domestic hierarchies which, in the absence of the patriarchal tradition, are often contested and overtly challenged. Far from approximating an egalitarian ideal, the relationship between ninja spouses appears to anticipate violent interactions.

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<sup>12</sup> In the following chapter I will examine how such marginal social incorporation relates to expectations of generosity and ninja wealth.

## Living areas

In this section I will analyse the social organisation of living areas in the mines and the kinds of relationships that develop between neighbours. I will show how the autonomy that is desired within the nuclear household is asserted socially through the relationships cultivated beyond the household unit.

In the river valleys near the village, thousands of miners live in *gers* and tattered camping tents pitched closely up against each other. As the hillsides and valley floors gradually become perforated with deep mining holes, miners repeatedly relocate to different grounds in search of new suitable living areas. With mining activities

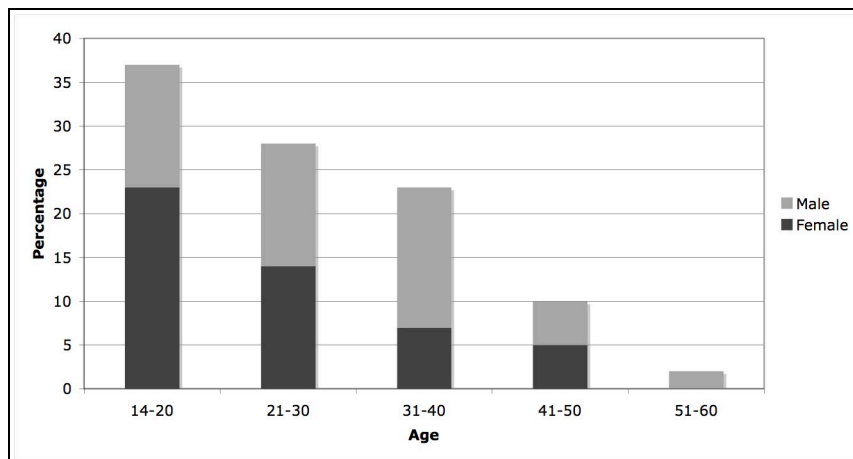


**Figure 4: An early morning in the Ölt mining area**

continuing day and night, the appearance of an area changes radically within only a few months. Without any permanent structures apart from the old eroding company buildings belonging to Erel, the occasional visitor relies on features of the landscape to provide orientation. However, as the miners divert rivers, move excavation areas and turn hillsides into living quarters, nothing is permanent; least of all the landscape that is excavated at great speed.

Despite such transient living conditions, a long-term visit reveals a particularly lasting feature of life in the mines. Although people seem to move at least once every few months, they tend to reorganise themselves in relatively stable groups of three to five *gers*. Within such clusters people

assist each other in daily household tasks and work-related activities. Whilst the grouping of *gers* physically resembles the formation of *ails* on the steppe, the similarities do not extend much further. Since these living areas rarely include relatives beyond the nuclear family, the *gers* within the cluster are not related through kinship or affinity. Instead each *ger* houses an independent unit of father, mother and children, and at times a friend. Only in rare cases does a *ger* host a grandparent or other relatives. As a result, the daily cooperation between households is grounded in individual expectations and decisions rather than the hierarchical kin obligations described in the previous chapter.



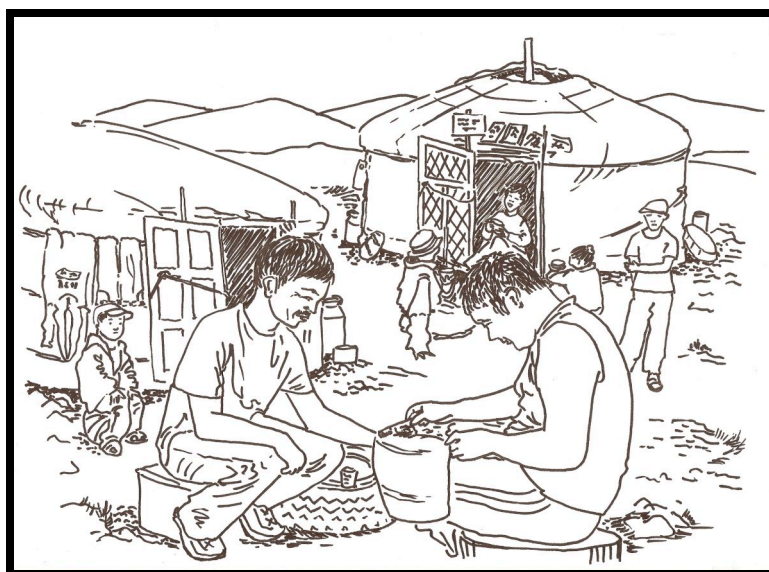
**Chart 4: Age and gender distribution in the mines**

From early morning both men and women call on their neighbours for small favours. Whilst women rely on each other for kitchen utensils, cooking ingredients and occasional help as child-minders, men often borrow each other's mining equipment. Outside the *gers* men can often be seen hunched on their heels in a circle around someone repairing his motorbike, sluice box or diesel generator. Packets of cigarettes and bottles of alcohol are passed around and amicable banter fills the air. Inside the *gers* women spend much time sweeping and washing the floors, tidying up and rearranging the household possessions. Given the muddy surroundings and the dirty mining equipment, a clean *ger* testifies to a woman's constant domestic work and provides an inviting environment for the frequent visiting between female neighbours and other friends.

Throughout the day there is much interaction between neighbouring households and such interaction is marked by informal and non-committal relations. For example, monetary loans are rarely extended or even requested within clusters of cooperating households. Mutual support between households is common on an everyday basis but never discussed in the terms of obligation,



such as *yostoi*<sup>13</sup> and *heregtei*. These expressions are common among herders when directing household members who are in a lower social position than the speaker. In a herding household it is thus usual for the household head to use these expressions when addressing his wife, children, and other members of the *ail*. Younger household members similarly use the expressions when addressing their juniors. However, if they attempt to address their seniors in this way, the reaction is usually to overtly ignore the statement. Since these expressions pre-suppose the existence of a hierarchical relationship between speaker and listener, they require the speaker to be in a position where he or she can command the respect necessary for imposing obligations on others. It is only within such a social hierarchy that speakers can expect of listeners to accept their demands.



**Figure 2: Neighbours helping each other**

In the mines, however, such expressions seem limited to situations of emergency or urgency. In everyday life among ninjas, requests for assistance are instead described in collective voluntary terms that express the speaker's wish rather than his or her demand or expectation (-*ya*, -*ye*, -*yo*, 'let's...'). Such a volutative verb suffix does not require a superior position of the speaker but rather casts the relationship between speaker and listener as potentially equal. In recognising the interests of the listener, the emphasis is thus shifted from the speaker onto the listener in terms of agency. Whereas the situation itself and the history of mutual assistance between speaker and listener may of course contribute to the listener's decision, the verb suffix presents the suggestion as markedly non-obligatory. Moreover, the volutative verb suffix emphasises that the task is not expected to be carried out singularly by the listener, but in unison with the speaker. The suggested

<sup>13</sup> The word *yos* has meanings such as rule, custom, order and etiquette (Bawden 1997:151), thus suggesting an

action is therefore not cast as the listener's own obligation, but rather as a potentially shared interest.

By using these particular ways of communicating collective possibilities as opposed to individual obligations, I suggest that neighbours convey and produce through discourse the kind of relationship they are taking part in. In minimising the use of expressions that presuppose a hierarchical positioning of speaker and listener, ninjas acknowledge and reproduce positions of autonomy. Not being in a position where the speaker can command the listener's respect to take on obligations, such impositions of power are most likely to be countered by being ignored or, especially among drunkards, violence. In contrast, within the ninja nuclear household, parents relay to their children required tasks precisely through the expressions that presuppose hierarchy, expecting the listener to take on the obligation as an sign of respect<sup>14</sup>. As in the previous section, violence can thus be seen as a way of asserting the desired distribution of power within the particular relationship. It is therefore only parents who can verbally assert their authority over others without openly inviting conflict.

## Friendship

In this section I will continue my exploration into the ways in which autonomy is asserted socially. By considering the role of joking between neighbours and other friends, I will suggest that the degree of informality that usually characterises such interactions approximates a mockery of the respectfulness with which kinsmen interact.

The practice of joking has long been a topic in anthropology, especially since Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 1949) coined the concept of 'joking relationships'. He noticed that a seemingly disrespectful form of joking is permitted within particular affinal relationships. This joking is prevalent, for example, between mother's brother and sister's son in patrilineal societies (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:202). Radcliffe-Brown suggested that, since such a relationship is structurally fraught with tension given the nephew's higher status despite his junior generation, joking prevents diverging interests to turn into overt hostility<sup>15</sup>. Apart from releasing tensions, the playful teasing and joking is also capable of establishing alliances. Whereas the enduring lineages represented in African

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accepted social order.

<sup>14</sup> I rarely came across parents using expressions that presuppose hierarchy when talking to each other.

<sup>15</sup> Since a mother's brother often lives far from a sister's son in Uyanga, I was not able to investigate the applicability of Radcliffe-Brown's observations during my fieldwork.

descent theory are based on kin relations, 'joking relationships' and their alliances are based on interpersonal relations characteristic of friendship. Extending his insights into the significance of friendship relations for the practice of joking, Mary Douglas (1999) argued that joking formed a forceful 'anti-rite' (ibid.:155), capable of attacking hierarchy in favour of equality and *comunitas*. Although Radcliffe-Brown and Douglas pointed to the subversive potential of joking within contexts of social hierarchy, I will follow Howe and Sherzer (1986) in calling for a shift from "structure to action and creativity" (ibid.:680). That is, rather than approaching joking as a structural mechanism at a macro-social level, I consider the personal strategies and experiences involved in such situations.

The following excerpt from my field notes shows how friendship in the mines is produced through a form of heavy teasing and joking that is unimaginable within kin relations:

A woman was skinning marmots while one of her husband's friends was helping us sharpen knives. We all chatted quietly and the atmosphere was relaxed and peaceful. However, when her husband returned from his errands, the atmosphere suddenly changed. In a loud boisterous voice, the husband unleashed dry and almost cruel jokes at his friend, who said nothing in return. The kids present started to tease the friend by calling him increasingly disrespectful names and throwing nuts at him. The friend didn't say anything. He just got up and sat on the couch. As the teasing became fiercer, the friend eventually got up and threatened to hit him. Everybody laughed and the teasing of the friend finally stopped.

(Field notes)

Whilst the physical aggression in this situation is particular to interactions between male friends, the joking and personal defence is, however, a common scenario for interactions between *naizuud* more generally in the mines. Although the friend in the above situation accepts more teasing than most men, it shows the degree to which provocative ridicule is carried out between people who call themselves friends. Since the mines host thousands of people from all parts of Mongolia, the recurring verbalised fear of 'strangers' (*gadny ulsuud*) with hidden intentions sets the stage for the miners' consolidation of friendship. Not only do friends verbally and physically demonstrate the casual informality of their relationship, but they also utilise the very means that are most certain to incite violent responses had the target not been a friend. Through intense mockery and teasing, friends assert that their relationship is ultimately peaceful and unquestionably friendly. The joking is in this way rather a quintessential part of what makes a person a friend, occupying a social space far from the uncertainty and feared maliciousness of strangers.

Having spent the previous nine months in the herding areas where such intense joking and teasing is limited, upon my arrival in the mines I was struck by the extent to which ninjas joked with each other. During my first day with a new host family, I must have been visibly confused when my host came up to me and said:

“I’m sorry. I’m very sorry if I say bad things. I’m just joking, right? You know I’m just joking but it’s important that you can take my jokes because here everybody jokes all the time. You need to be able to take our jokes, ok”.

(Field notes)

As joking flourishes between friends, it asserts individual autonomy and verbal agency that other social relationships do not generally accommodate. Joking not only produces intimacy and trust among friends, but also evades hierarchical structures of respect and deferential behaviour. The near absence of joking within kin relationships highlights this point. Whereas a ninja is likely to joke heavily with his or her friends and neighbours, it is rare to witness any such discourse between children and their parents. As mentioned earlier, relationships within the nuclear family are hierarchically ranked in practice and in speech, and parents counter disrespectful joking with stern looks and immediate reprimands. In joking, the speaker positions him or herself as equal if not superior to the targeted person, and this autonomous position is irreconcilable with his or her subordination within the nuclear household. Whilst joking marks friends from strangers, it also denies the hierarchical relationships that make kin. During my stays in the mines, I was thus incorporated into my host families as a friend with whom one could and indeed should joke, and not as a kinsman in the way that I was in the herding areas<sup>16</sup>.

Whereas relationships within the family group are generated almost independently of ego’s wishes, practices and intentions (and depend on the extent to which people recall relationships between ego’s predecessors), friendships require ego’s intention and recognition. Without wanting the friendship, ninjas will remain strangers to one another. Among ninjas, this central autonomous position of ego is evoked in daily language and enacted in social interactions with friends, epitomised in the disrespectful joking that characterises friendship.

## **The organisation of work teams**

In understanding how individual autonomy plays out in work situations, I will in this final section consider the consistent links between established friendships and the organisation of work. The following excerpt from my field notes shows how friends involved in different mining sectors can help each other toward monetary rewards.

Although visitors kept stopping by the *ger*, the young miner tried hard to get some sleep. He had been working all last night with a friend and found more gold than I have ever before seen ninjas produce. Before collapsing on the bed he told me: “The only reason why we found so much gold is because my friend helped us out. When he has the night-shift (*shönönii esmen*), he sometimes gives me a ‘*kraats*’ of gravel (*shoroo*) for free”. It would have taken the young miner several days to scrape loose with the hand-pick as much gravel as his friend dug out for him. Later in the day his friend appeared and I asked him about their friendship. “I have only known him for about ten days, I think. But it isn’t always the time that defines a good friendship, right<sup>17</sup>? I haven’t known him for long but I already know that he’s a good person (*sain hün*), very good person”. He laughed as he said the last words, turned towards his sleeping friend and started wrestling him until he eventually woke up.

(Field notes)

When the young miner had come back in the morning after mining for more than twelve hours, we went together to the gold trader’s *ger*. It appeared that he and another had washed more than nine grams of gold during the night, worth more than 170’000 tg., which they split in three. In the late afternoon the young miner bought bottles of beer to share with his friends, followed by the question: “when do you next have the night-shift?” (*chi daraa hezee shöniin eeljiig garah ve?*) As ninja friends help each other in their work, be it within or across mining sectors, they are able to reap large profits<sup>18</sup>. Friendship networks become entangled in work teams, resulting in not only a blurred but indeed inapplicable division between work and leisure, colleague and friend. The instrumentality of friendship and its link to moneymaking does not challenge the basis of friendship but, I suggest, reinforces it. As I will discuss in the following chapter, monetary wealth (as opposed to material wealth such as animals) is concealable, unpredictable and entirely private. It is difficult for other miners to predict how much a ninja has earned in a particular day and there is no discourse that would legitimise such private questioning. It is not considered appropriate, even among friends,

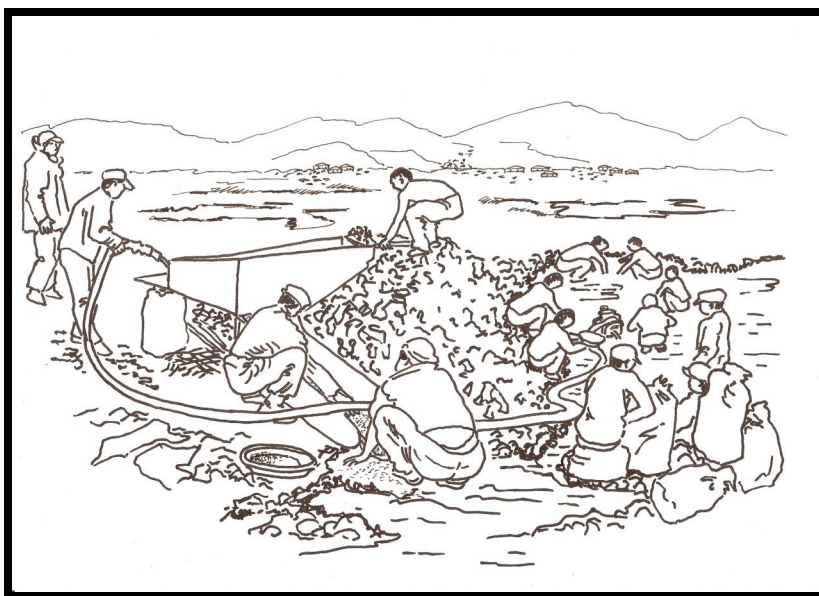
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<sup>16</sup> The relatively short duration of my visits to the mining areas may partly account for why my ninja host families incorporated me into their household units as a friend and not a kinsman.

<sup>17</sup> *Saihan nöhörlöliig dandaa tsag hugatsaa todorhoilohgüi.*

<sup>18</sup> Friends often use each other’s mining equipment, such as sluices, generators and pumps. This means that if someone does not have the capital to make these investments, a friend can step in and help. By lending mining equipment to friends, poorer ninjas are able to wash for more gold and thus earn more money.

to enquire into someone's profit, and in situations where people jokingly make such attempts, the reply is usually a long standardised elaboration on life's misery: "life is so difficult now. There is no longer any gold here. It has become worse and worse. What will we do? With no gold it's difficult..." Whilst individual autonomy is restricted within the household unit, it is cherished among friends. It is thus hardly surprising that work teams rarely include relatives.



**Figure 3: A mining team**

The following excerpt from my field notes shows how relatives receive no preferential treatment with regards to the organisation of work teams.

It was early evening and an elder miner had just finished his work-shift. Tired and exhausted, he collapsed on the floor. "I'm too old for this!" he exclaimed. I passed him a cup of tea and asked about his work-team. "We are thirty workers, divided over three shifts (*eel*) of twelve hours. So the work is like this: morning to evening shift (*ödört*) with ten of us working for twelve hours, then the next day I have the evening to morning shift (*shönöd*) and then I get the third day off. On the team we are a total of fifteen men and fifteen women. It just happens to be so that we have the same number of men and women. It's not always like that. It just depends... whoever is a good worker, man or woman, whoever can do the job well can work on the team. It doesn't matter where you are from and whether you are a relative of someone on the team. All that matters is that you are hard-working and reliable. If you don't turn up for one of your shifts, the others on the team will get really upset..."

(Field notes)

If relatives arrive to the mines in search of work, ninjas welcome them by showing lavish hospitality and helping them organise work. Using networks of friends, they often try to get their relatives accepted onto one of their friends' work teams rather than their own. Since people usually live near others in the work team, newly arrived relatives may be incorporated into their cluster of *gers* rather than living near their ninja relatives. Spending many hours a day working, such newly arrived relatives thus often end up socialising more with their own friends than with their relatives. Beyond the occasional visits and drinking binges, the presence of relatives in the mines is therefore barely noticeable in everyday life. However, there is nothing intrinsic to the work process that renders relatives, whether female or male, less capable of carrying out the mining tasks. Moreover, as mentioned in the excerpt above, even the selection process does not discriminate against or give preferential treatment to relatives. According to him, as well as other miners with whom I specifically discussed this issue, it is merely a question of being hard-working and reliable. Yet in practice, siblings, cousins and other relatives who live in the same mining area rarely work together. Given the concentration of ninjas in Uyanga, many miners are relatives, but upon asking ninjas directly about this issue, most of them just shake their heads whilst replying “*medehgüi*”.

I suggest that this reluctance to work with relatives is another expression of the individual autonomy that I have discussed in this chapter. By avoiding working together, ninjas limit social interactions with people who are part of an extensive kin hierarchy that requires them to take up a subordinate position. Regardless of the age and gender of visiting relatives, deferential behaviour, respectful language and generosity are expected, and if the willingness to serve is not forthcoming, the host is said to feel the repercussions of kin and the anger of spirits (discussed in chapter five). On the rare occasion when older male household heads visit ninja relatives, the status differentials between host and guest become particularly pronounced. The host will immediately prepare fresh salty milk tea, serve cookies and cook a warm meal. Using respectful language, interactions are polite, deferential and anticipatory, and the visit may last as long as the visitor intends it to. The visitor in this sense occupies the *ger* on his terms and the host has to accommodate the guest's wishes (see further discussion of visiting practices in chapter six). If the visitor is not a relative, such hospitable behaviour is unlikely to be displayed. In marginalising interactions with relatives in the mines, I believe that ninjas attempt to avoid the pressure of patriarchal structures that inform all kin and affinal relatedness. As ninjas ensure that relatives are accepted onto work-teams that are different from their own, the physical distance provides minimal social obligations as well as space for the individual autonomy that I have argued are valued so much by ninjas.

Given the capability and interest that ninjas display in cultivating friendships, in conclusion I return to the vignette with which I opened this chapter. As herders blame ninjas for most acts that they see as immoral and appear to relish accounts that confirm such behaviour among ninjas, they engage in a moral discourse that emphasises the opposition between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Such moral mapping not only provides readily available scapegoats for herders, but also consolidates the complete otherness of the miners. By insisting on them being ‘strangers’ who are dangerous because they are under no obligation to show respect to anyone, herders prevent elaborate details about ninjas from entering daily conversation. Whilst this ideology of strangers is conducive in asserting difference and otherness, I suggest that such a separation is attempted in order to exclude that which is feared; namely, the sociality that herders emphatically deny ninjas. If herders were to recognise the apparent success with which ninjas distance themselves from kinsmen and achieve autonomy through friendship, their own kinsmen might leave for the mines too - possibly leading to the collapse or weakening of the kin hierarchy. Moreover, if they were to acknowledge the higher social position of ninja wives, how would they fare with their own incorporation of affinity into the kin hierarchy? The reproduction of patriarchal relations might become as strained an accomplishment as it is in the mines. This chapter has thus shown that herders espouse this ideology precisely because they know that ninjas are often more than strangers.

### **Labour migration and individualisation**

The relationship between labour migration and individual autonomy discussed in this chapter is not unique to the gold rush in Uyanga. Indeed, it seems to be common ethnographically to areas of new economic practices, especially industrial labour. A striking parallel to ninjas’ quest for distance from their extended families can thus be found in a study by Shah (2006) on seasonal casual labour migration to brick kilns in India. Shah describes how migrants do not consider their movement in the economic terms commonly advanced by Indian social activists and middle-class locals. The migrants are not forced by poverty to take up arduous employment away from their families, nor do they accumulate the substantial profits that a concerted effort would generate. Instead, migrants describe how migration is a temporary phase in their lives where amorous affairs can be pursued away from the constraints of village life and controlling kinsmen. Since such affairs are legitimised upon the birth of a child, young couples can evade restrictions on premarital sexual relations and work at the kilns until the baby is born (Shah 2006:103). In this way, the capitalist work environment is not simply exploitative, but also provides a space for desired personal freedom. In Parry’s (2001) analysis of illicit affairs initiated among the labour force of the Bhilai Steel Plant in India, he similarly shows how it is within the work environment that workers can engage more



freely in amorous pursuits. Since the industrial site enables both new romances whilst destroying others, married couples “often avoid to work on the same site and contractors are reluctant to employ them” (Parry 2001:808). By temporarily relocating to a different place, workers at the brick kilns and at the steel plant thus seek social relationships which would otherwise not be available to them. Whilst the village and the industrial township appear rigid and controlling, it is at the work place that freedom can be attained.

Such transformative potential inherent in physical relocation is also described in many of the studies carried out by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute of the former Northern Rhodesia<sup>19</sup>. In his study of trade unionism among African employees at a Copperbelt mine, Epstein (1958) describes how ‘tribal elders’ in 1931 were elected by the workforce to liaise with the mine management. However, already in a 1935, a group of striking miners rejected the authority of the elders and, as a result, a ‘new African urban leadership’ took shape. These new leaders were actively engaged in “a new form of society – a society where clan affiliation or attachment to village headman and chief were no longer of primary significance in ordering social relations” (Epstein 1958:103). A gap generated by industrial labour migration had separated life in the village from life in the town, confronting people with two mutually exclusive and entirely independent realms of existence. Whilst village life fertilised ‘primordial affiliations’, the industrial town allowed the worker to shed his previous loyalties and emerge as an individualised worker, following the teleological footsteps of industrialisation “blazed by Birmingham” (Parry 2005:141). In this vein, Gluckman famously proclaimed that “an African miner is a miner” who “possibly resembles miners everywhere” (Gluckman 1961:68-69)<sup>20</sup>. In these studies, labour migration from village to town thus involved a parallel transformation not only in the kinds of relationships a person forged, but also the predicted destiny of those involved. Even if migrants did not desire individual autonomy, it would inevitably follow in the trail of industrialisation.

The link between industrialisation and emerging individual autonomy forms a central trope in the modern social thought of, among others, Marx, Durkheim and Weber. They concurred that with the world’s growing specialisation, mechanisation and rationalisation, people in turn become

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<sup>19</sup> The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute was founded in 1938, and the first director and initial members of staff were social anthropologists. Following the independence of Northern Rhodesia in 1964, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute became part of the new University of Zambia and its name was changed to the Institute for Social Research.

<sup>20</sup> I agree with Grillo (1999) that Gluckman was first and foremost “offering a methodological injunction” (Grillo 1999:228), insisting on a more nuanced approach to urban studies than was common at the time. ‘An African miner’ should methodologically not be forced by Western prejudice into a presumed category of ‘a tribal African’. However, in Gluckman’s attempt to distinguish his African informants from the ‘tribal’ others of the discipline at the time, he also

increasingly individualised. Although they evaluated such individualisation in radically different ways, industrialisation formed the key point at which such transformative changes would occur. Whereas Marx considered the progressive individualisation not only necessary for the coming of the socialist revolution (1947 [1845]), but also exploitative for those who did not hold the means of production (1976 [1867]), Durkheim identified the emancipation from the '*conscience collective*' with the deterioration of moral restraint, its anomic division of labour and ultimately higher rates of suicide. Whilst Durkheim (1951 [1897]) suggested that the religious doctrine of Protestantism, with its emphasis on individualised worship, led to greater social suicide rates (Morrison 1995:330), Weber (1958) conjoined Protestantism (in particular Calvinism) with a growing bureaucracy that struggles to hold together an atomised society of lonely individuals who hope to achieve salvation through their hard labour. As such, the process of industrialisation is depicted to form the economic and historical turning point for the creation of the modern individual.

The quest for distance from extended patriarchal households, which I argue ninjas seek, is therefore not a unique or historically novel scenario<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, its commonality in both ethnographic and social theoretical works forces the question of whether this relationship between industrialisation and individualisation is an actual universal phenomenon or rather a theoretically appealing trope. Since many ethnographic studies focus on the *difference* between the origin and the destination of labour migrants (see for example also Ong 1987), such physical distance becomes a transformative space from which new persons emerge. As people migrate from village to town, from agricultural areas to large copper mines, their transformation seems to correlate with classical '*rites de passage*'. Although some studies of labour migration have represented the process as such (Norman 2004), most studies marginalise the very process that generates noticeable changes. By reifying physical distance and social difference, I believe that the trope of industrialisation risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy with rapid claims to universality. However, by attending to the *relationship* between the village and the town, such universality cannot be presumed and the process of transformation becomes subject to analysis rather than inference. By demarcating only physical places, I suggest that we are better able to understand the mutually implicated social processes that emerge in, across and between such places. That is, it is by looking at the relationship between

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placed them within an explicit overarching master narrative of urbanisation and industrialisation (see Ferguson 1999:24-37 for a critical review of the historiography).

<sup>21</sup> Even within the Mongolian context, the process of individualisation might not be unique to today's ninja mining practices. For example, a Buddhist lama's quest for Enlightenment also involves radically altering social relations. However, whereas a Buddhist lama's quest for Enlightenment is a process centring around a single person, this section is concerned with *societal* processes of individualisation.

villagers and townsmen, herders and miners, that local meanings of industrial labour come to the fore.

## Conclusion

In Uyanga the vast mountainous steppe land stretches as far as the eye can see, with green peaks and wide valleys, dotted with white *gers* and large herds. However, upon crossing the Ong river near the village, the steppe is abruptly transformed into a moon-like landscape in all shades of grey. The ground is perforated with deep mining holes, with dilapidated *gers* and tents pitched right next to each other. The physical contrast between the steppe and the mines is striking. When talking to local herders, the contrary landscapes are represented as also hosting mutually exclusive populations. On the steppe, the idiom of kinship is applied to most social relationships, (see previous chapter) and living peacefully together is described as a treasured quality. However, according to local herders, people working in the mines are dangerous strangers because they are under no obligation to show respect to anyone. As a result, drinking and violence is said to abound in the mines and you can never be certain of a ninja's intentions. It is said that they live entirely beyond the moral framework of herders; something that is confirmed regularly when dung thieves and others steal the products on which herders depend. In this sense, social relations are just as demarcated as the physical landscape.

Although it would be possible to approach the new economic phenomenon of ninja mining by emphasising both physical distance and social difference, such an endeavour would merely serve to confirm the representations advanced by herders and further scapegoat ninjas. Moreover, such an analytical approach would severely misconstrue the ethnographic reality. As I attempted to show in the first part of this chapter, local economic circuits and kin networks cross-cut the bifurcated landscape. As ninja mining has opened up a new and lucrative market for the milk and meat products of herders, trade now connects herders increasingly with the mines rather than the village. Indeed, in addition to the economic transactions, such trade invites growing social involvement, as described in one of the life histories. For the curious herder, it seemed that selling milk in the mines was not primarily about earning a cash income, but rather generating a large social network away from the patriarchal household group. With kin networks extending beyond the steppe and into the mines, herders live with a daily reality which is not only economically but also socially shaped by the new economy of ninja mining.

Given the extent to which herders are socially and economically implicated in ninja mining, the rest of this chapter has considered how autonomy is actively produced by ninjas. Focusing on social interactions in everyday life, I examined the aggressive and discursive practices between spouses and friends. As ninja nuclear families have moved away from their extended herding households, the hierarchical ordering of social relationships is open to contestation and at times overt challenge. Among friends, however, such hierarchical relations are mocked through disrespectful joking and linguistic markers that imply hierarchy are generally avoided in daily discourse. Instead, discursive practices that underscore the agential position of ego are frequently used. By living and working with friends rather than kinsmen, ninjas limit social interactions with people who are part of an extensive kin hierarchy that would require them to take up a subordinate position. Ninjas thus produce autonomy by engaging in discursive practices and cultivating social relations that not only allow for, but even anticipate their non-subordinate ego.

The perceived dangers of ninja sociality are not only marginalised from life on the steppe through the ideology of ‘strangers’. As I will discuss in the following chapter, ideas about ninja wealth and its ‘polluted money’ (*buzartai möngö*) attempt to further suppress the disruptive sociality which takes place among people who are anything but strangers.

## Chapter 4: The Politics of Wealth and Envy

### Introduction

In the sparsely populated valleys of Uyanga, herders are quick to notice the new acquisitions of their neighbours. Over a cup of *süütei tsai* or a large bowl of *airag* people discuss the purchasing household's rumoured earnings from cashmere (*yamaany nooluur*) sales in the regional capital (*aimgiin töv*), the estimated interest rates on their presumed bank loans, and the expected money received in return for the temporary 'loan' of a milking yak (*ünee*) to a neighbour. These rumoured strategies are considered in relation to the estimated possessions of the household in question. Was the purchase sound? Why did they make the purchase? Older herders who have lived in the same area throughout their lives are perceived to be the most skilled at this guessing game. As the years pass, these experienced herders accumulate detailed insights into not only local herd sizes, but also regional weather patterns, the usual hunting tracks of wolves and optimal herding practices. In estimating the material and animate possessions of *ails* as well as their potential for making new purchases, elder herders often claim to only need to cast a quick glance at an *ail* to know their wealth (*bayalag*). A local herder was particularly apt in these calculations, as the following vignette shows.

One day I was riding through a distant valley with an elder herder, and with each *ail* we passed he provided an elaborate inventory of their possessions. He listed everything from the number of animals to Chinese motorbikes. I was impressed by his in-depth familiarity with households I didn't even know he visited. "It's easy", he explained to me. "When you see an *ail* you can immediately tell which animals they have got, how many of each, how they use the animal products, whether they are good herders or not, how many sons and daughters they have, etc. It's all there for you to see (*harah*). Is the area around their *gers* clean? What kind of garbage (*hog*) do they have lying around? Do you see any tracks from tyres? Even if you've never visited the *ail*, you can still tell how wealthy (*bayan*) they are. Here nothing is secret (*büh yum nuutsgüi*)".

Living in an area where people can immediately observe, count and compare pastoral wealth, it is maybe not surprising that new purchases are subject to intense gossip, curiosity and interest. By consolidating past wealth into new possessions, households reveal not only the personal networks of which they are a part, but also their capacity for making new acquisitions. Such a capacity may

be played out in classical barter-situations, where the parties involved exchange goods without using a shared currency, or, more commonly, in monetary exchanges. Through conversions of monetary or non-monetary wealth, possessions acquire a new materiality that is visible and comparable to the wealth of others. As herders diminish their hidden monetary wealth, accumulated through state pensions or previous sales of animals and animal products, a greater degree of visibility and certainty is engendered. Such conversions of wealth aid the attempts of local herders to guess the wealth of others.

When I first arrived in Uyanga, I was immediately struck by the great interest people showed in estimating each other's wealth. I initially attributed such curiosity to minimal sources of diversion in everyday life and a potential rivalry for affluence among local herders. However, I soon realised that much more was at stake. Indeed, this was not simply a question of creating a local topography of wealth or incorporating others into a shared economic framework. Rather, daily conversations about new acquisitions and estimated wealth of others were centrally related to issues of power and morality; a realisation that was brought upon me when confronted with herders' fears of ninjas and their money. Although the conversations among herders seemed casual and quotidian, their motivations and implications were anything but.

In this chapter I draw upon Guyer's (2004) historical and integrative approach to economic life, and in particular her consideration of how seemingly disparate economies form part of a single cultural configuration of exchange relationships (see Introduction). Rather than assuming the incommensurability of pastoral and ninja economies, I examine the interstices between local economic circuits and the moral evaluations to which they are subjected. Whilst pastoral wealth is largely visible, countable and comparable, the monetary wealth of ninjas is concealed, unpredictable and largely private. Also, whereas herders are expected to share their wealth with others through displays of hospitality and generosity, the money of ninjas is described as 'heavy' (*hiind*), 'polluted' (*buzartai*) and preferably used for immediate consumption by its owners<sup>1</sup>. These seemingly contrary kinds of wealth belie a fundamental mutuality: both pastoral and ninja wealth affect people's access to the power of black magic. When generating pastoral wealth, senior patriarchs are considered capable of making others fall ill and possibly die through practices of 'malicious gossip' (*hel am*). However, such black magic capabilities require accurate knowledge of others' wealth. With the growing involvement of herders in ninja mining, hidden wealth earned in

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'money' to refer to a currency that is a means of exchange, a mode of payment and a standard of value. As such, I consider 'money' equivalent to Polanyi's (1944) definition of 'general purpose money' and Robbins and Akin's (1999) definition of 'state currency'.

the mines may become incorporated into pastoral wealth and thus render such black magic practices less potent.

By considering the moral evaluation of ninja wealth, this chapter suggests that the fear of ninja money is not related to a broader critique of the state currency, as is said to be the case in many other mining communities (eg. Clark 1993, Taussig 1980). Instead, I argue that it is the particular juncture between a historical condemnation of gold mining practices in Mongolia and the current social and economic mutuality of herders and miners in Uyanga that renders ninja money feared and ‘polluted’ (*buzartai*). That is, the ideological struggle to ensure that ninjas remain strangers (*gadny ulsuud*), devoid of social ties with known others (as discussed in the previous chapter), thus extends into local economic circuits by marking money earned from mining as dangerous. As such, the politics of wealth and envy in Uyanga can be seen as an attempt by herding patriarchs to ensure that the transactional orders of pastoral and ninja wealth remain forever separate (Parry and Bloch 1989). Yet, such a separation does not necessarily imply subordination or marginalisation, and patriarchs may ultimately be challenged from within.

### **Pastoral wealth**

In Uyanga herding *ails* tend to have yaks, sheep, horses and varying numbers of goats. However, many herders have described how they were so excited to become ‘private herders’ (*huviin malchin*) in the early 1990s that they purchased camels and cattle. Despite the attempt to defy the harsh weather conditions in the high altitude region, unfortunately not a single camel or cow has survived. Since it is now more than fifteen years ago that the herding collectives (*negdel*) of the socialist period were dismantled, people today rarely talk about current herd sizes as being related to the past division of herding collective animals. Instead, people see large herds as reflecting admirable herding skills, peaceful relations with local spirits and the good general conduct of a household. A herder can thus be highly skilled and have detailed knowledge of pastures and seasonal changes but still not manage to sustain his herd. As herders do not willingly discuss the delicate matters of household relations and spirits’ fortune (*hishig*), they rarely disclose exactly how many animals they have. However, they spend much time attempting to quantify the herd sizes of other local herders. Daily visits therefore often involve household heads discussing how many animals other herders in Uyanga might have. They even rank them: the first household group (*negdügeer ail*), the second household group, the third, etc, according to estimated wealth. The actual order is often under casual discussion among household heads in visiting situations, as the following vignette shows.

In between numerous drinks and cigarettes a close friend, who paid daily visits to our *ail*, said to the host: “I know you think he’s the fourth, but have you seen the large winter shed he just built? His herd must be much bigger than you think. I’m sure he’s the third now”. A dry laughter filled the air, a cigarette butt was thrown in the direction of the stove and another sip of vodka was downed before the host replied: “Well, you’ll see. I pass his herd everyday as I take my sheep out on the pasture. I trust my own eyes more than your fast tongue!” The two men laughed amicably before turning to another topic.

These comparisons of wealth do not only concern the number of animals, but also other household possessions such as motorbikes, solar panels and television satellites. That is, objects that are all visible, countable and comparable. This means that even if herders do not want to disclose their wealth, it is there for everybody to see.

In moving through the landscape and passing each *ail*, you can thus see not only clusters of *gers*, but also clusters of observable wealth. As *ails* are referred to colloquially by the household head’s first name, such wealth can be seen to illustrate and objectify *his* persona rather than the collective household labour that went into its production. The household head’s name and person are given a tangible material expression that can be compared to that of others, aided by its basis in quantifiable entities<sup>2</sup>. In this sense the patriarch has a lasting presence in the local landscape that cannot be easily ignored. In manifesting the peaceful incorporation of affines, the patriarch’s wealth asserts both his own persona and the successful continuity of his patriclan (*ovog*). Observable pastoral wealth thus expresses the status of household heads as well as the enduring presence of their kin group.

The visible wealth of herding households also leads to rising expectations of generosity (*ögöömör zan*). As wealthy herding patriarchs are approached through highly respectable address and deferential demeanour, they are also met with frequent requests from visitors for monetary and material charity. Although visitors are unlikely to instrumentally seek out generous *ails* for their visits, such considerations certainly play an important role in local visiting practices. Rumours of

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<sup>2</sup> The cultural value placed on the visible, quantifiable wealth of animals is reflected in a study of Inner Asian pastoralism carried out between 1991 and 1995 when drastic socio-economic instability hit the region. To the question of ‘what would you do in response to rises in the prices of livestock and livestock products?’, only between 10 and 15% said they would sell more livestock. “The aim of most pastoral households in all sites appeared to be to increase the number of their animals by consuming or selling as few as possible” (Humphrey and Sneath 1999:275). Although such findings suggest the regional tendency of directing ‘subsistence-domestic production’ towards self-sufficiency (ibid.:275), especially at a time of spiralling inflation, I believe they also reveal a more general cultural importance attached to visible wealth.



stingy (*nariin*) *ails* where visitors almost have to beg for a cup of salty of milk tea circulate alongside rumours of generous (*haramgüi ögöh*) *ails* offering not only drinks and food but also chocolate and other treats from the regional capital. Almost every day distant relatives and acquaintances arrived at my host families with the explicit purpose of asking for help, ranging from generously reduced prices for animals to particular material gifts<sup>3</sup>. My host fathers described proudly such requests as testimony to their recognised accumulation of wealth, and they claim that by giving they perform good deeds (*buyany beleg*) that will ensure a good rebirth (*dahin törölt*)<sup>4</sup>. But, not all household members support their desire to be generous.

Once, in a drunken moment, a household head lent his beautiful horse-riding saddle with big silver decorations (*möngön tonog*) to a distant acquaintance, and upon returning to his *ail*, they all insisted that he reclaim the saddle. However, to this day he has not re-visited the household and seems visibly annoyed by his family's insistence, at times culminating in frustrated complaints about how "his own family doesn't show him respect". The conflict between the interests of the household head versus the other household members is epitomised in their different interpretations of and responsibility for acts of generosity. Whereas the presence of guests highlights the material achievements and personal renown of the household head, they also present a practical burden for other household members. As the household accepts the requests of visitors and thereby diminishes its overall wealth, objections are likely to arise from within. Since younger members of the *ail* can only obtain a share of the household's wealth upon marriage (see chapter two), they often prefer to retain wealth within the *ail* rather than succumbing to the numerous requests from visitors. Moreover, in the case of daughters-in-law (*ber*), although their dowry animals (*injiin mal*) are legally regarded as their own, they practically form part of the patriarch's wealth and may thus be given away. As a result, acts of generosity may jeopardise claims to wealth advanced by both kin and affinal household members.

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<sup>3</sup> Writing about Tuva in the 1920s – 1930s, Vainshtein (1980) describes how wealthy herders sometimes passed on animals to poor herders, usually agnatic kinsmen, yet in return only occasionally allowed them the milk of the pastured animals (*saun*). Given the economic dependency within kin relationships, Vainshtein considers such practices the "patriarchal exploitation of kinsmen" (ibid.:106-109). In Uyanga today, however, poor herders can escape such dependency relations by becoming involved in tin mining. I therefore do not think that in Uyanga the temporary placement of animals with poor relatives can be considered 'patriarchal exploitation'. Moreover, as I argue, the patriarchs themselves are highly interested in lending out their animals, thereby consolidating their *persona* beyond the *ail*.

<sup>4</sup> Despite intense prosecutions of religious specialists during the Mongolian socialist period, Buddhist theologies and institutions still have a dominant presence in the country. Closely related to the Tibetan Buddhist order of *Dge-lugs-pa* (see the following chapter), Buddhism in Mongolia emphasises the importance of *karma* (the consequences of action) for the attainment of salvation. 'Rebirth' is thus a central concept linking actions of the present with a person's future bodily manifestations, as portrayed in the Wheel of Life.

It is generally only the household head who makes decisions about monetary and material matters, and visitors rarely attempt to make requests to other members of an *ail*. When visitors advance their requests, they give elaborate and emotional descriptions of their dire situation with so much detail that it seems impossible for the patriarch to dismiss their requests smoothly and easily. Following such accounts, visitors usually emphasise the host's unparalleled wealth and the ease with which his generosity can be shown. The decision is thus presented as a question of the household head's *individual* willingness to give, and not an issue of his material ability or social interest. A visitor's request presents in this sense not just a material burden, but also an invitation for the patriarch to assert his authority domestically as well as publicly. By minimising potential envy (*ataa*) and accepting the requests of visitors, the household head asserts his position both within the household and in society at large.

### Malicious gossip

Since the expectations and demands of visitors appear ever growing, it seems the household head could end up surrendering the entire wealth of the *ail* to them. The patriarch must somehow decide the degree to which he shows generosity. However, when the household head refuses such a request, the visitor may become envious of the *ail*'s wealth and start spreading 'malicious gossip' (*hel am*). Described by Højer (2003) as "the 'witchcraft' of ordinary life" (2003:81), I was surprised that I never heard any mentioning of *hel am* during my first year of fieldwork. My host families did not talk to me about the phenomenon, nor did I overhear anything during visits. However, at the height of winter during my second year of fieldwork I suddenly caught a quick comment concerning the death of a horse caused by *hel am*. Since my host families had not talked to me about malicious gossip before, I was puzzled and wondered if I had maybe misunderstood the utterance. It was brushed it away, claiming that it was not important. I insisted that they repeat the sentence and eventually it was whispered to me. I asked what *hel am* was and they explained:

*Hel am* arises when people say bad things about others. If people are envious (*hor shar*) or jealous (*jötööch*) at somebody, they might for example wish them misfortune and cause either specific things like sickness or death onto the *ail* or general misfortune. It is most often rich (*bayan*) people who are targeted with *hel am*.

(Field notes)

Whilst malicious gossip is not something people talk about publicly, much of confidential conversation within the household concerns fears and rumours of personal *hel am* attacks. As I

grew closer with my local hosts, much of daily conversation increasingly concerned malicious gossip, and it became easier for me to ask questions about the phenomenon. According to my hosts and ritual specialists<sup>5</sup> in the area, any person regardless of age and gender can instigate malicious gossip. The only requirement is in-depth information about the target, detailing his or her family situation, extent of kinship ties, number and kinds of animals, work chores and material possessions. A local Buddhist lama explained to me that the exact information necessary to inflict harm onto others depends on the perpetrator's motivations for spreading malicious gossip. If it, for example, arises out of envy of the target's monetary wealth, comprehensive details about monetary and material income, spending levels and past investment, savings and extended loans are necessary. The more detailed the information, the more powerful the malicious gossip is said to become. As herders are generally reluctant to reveal the extent of their wealth, such insights require frequent visiting and an extensive network of trustworthy friends and relatives. Since household members other than the patriarch are unlikely to be able to cultivate such expansive relationships, I suggest that *hel am* is a black magic practice accessible only to patriarchs. The insights necessary for carrying out powerful *hel am* is not available to any other members of the household group.

The calamities said to be generated by *hel am* never concern weather disasters, such as drought or extreme cold winters, nor indirect unfortunate human events, such as encounters with thieves or murderers. Instead, malicious gossip is seen to directly attack humans and animals, causing them to suddenly fall ill and possibly die. It seems that in instances of inexplicable misfortune combined with tense social relationships, people take recourse to *hel am* as a possible explanation, as exemplified in the excerpt below.

As we were herding the yaks, a close friend of mine started telling me about how two of her children had died prematurely. "My children were born too early but they could have survived, I'm sure... if only their deaths hadn't been caused by *hel am*. Those very years many of our animals also died and life was really difficult for us and my parents". She spoke with such urgency that there was no time to ask questions. She continued explaining that after her first child died, she was worried that something bad would happen to her second child. She therefore insisted on giving birth at the hospital in the regional capital, which is generally considered much better than the local hospital in Uyanga. They also had lamas carry out rituals in order to ensure the protection of the following newborn child against general misfortune and *hel am* in particular. They were very afraid something bad would happen, knowing that a lot of strong *hel*

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<sup>5</sup> I am here referring to Buddhist lamas in the monastery of Uyanga and ritual specialists, such as relatives of lamas and fortune-tellers, in the mining areas.

*am* was circulating. Yet the second child also died and the grief was unbearable. Finally, a third child was born and survived longer than the other two, but still to this day she is really worried that *hel am* will strike again and take their child away from them.

(Fieldnotes)

In this situation the young woman expresses an unusual degree of certainty that her children were killed by malicious gossip. Since a close relative of hers was a ritual specialist who carried out black magic for others (*har tsugiin lam*, lit. ‘black direction lama’), she fears that her family is disliked by many. Although her father and most of their herd have now passed away, her family still seems to suffer and she always fears that their surviving child will be targeted. In order to protect their family, she and her husband make daily offerings to their guardian spirit (*sahius sahigch*), burn incense, recite mantras and request local lamas to carry out rituals. They also try to minimise tense situations with visitors and relatives, and in general strive to fit in as ‘good herders’ (*sain malchin*), asserting their loyal intentions and communal aspirations<sup>6</sup>.

Although the consequences of an attack are debated extensively, my host family rarely dwells on who has initiated the malicious gossip. People have explained to me that “you never know who spreads *hel am*”<sup>7</sup>, “no one would admit to spreading it”<sup>8</sup> and “it’s impossible to know anyway”<sup>9</sup>. Conversations about *hel am* therefore often evoke an underlying generalised agent beyond description and identification. Any local person is considered capable of engaging in such spiteful affairs and this omnipresence gives rise to much fear and suspicion in everyday social encounters. As accusations of being stingy or realisations of a household’s wealth may prompt the circulation of malicious gossip, negotiating expected generosity becomes a strained accomplishment.

Whilst Højer (2003) has argued that the fear and proliferation of malicious gossip can be seen as an index of enmity and suspicion that isolates households from one another, I will suggest that it, more importantly, also manifests the intense and mutually implicated sociality that people are inevitably part of. In spite of the potential for *hel am* in most social relationships, people still visit other households and, in turn, willingly accept visitors into their own. Furthermore, although people recognise that certain kinds of misfortune are likely to have been inflicted by particular persons spreading malicious gossip, they are still reluctant to single out and confront these suspected

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<sup>6</sup> As people seek to fit in and be ‘good herders’ as a way of minimising *hel am*, this “‘witchcraft’ of ordinary life” (Højer 2003) can be seen to contribute to the normative pressure among pastoralists to continue their herding traditions and not become involved in local mining.

<sup>7</sup> *Hel amiig hen gargaad baigaag chi medehgüi shüü.*

<sup>8</sup> *Hen ch hel am gargahyg hüshev de.*

perpetrators. Such accusations would disregard the social importance of concealing mutual disagreements by placing private suffering in the public sphere, with its endless scrutinising and gossiping – thus amounting to a display of profoundly disrespectful and isolating behaviour. Given the strict status hierarchy in the area, open accusations would endanger amicable relationships and their larger networks of mutual support on which herding households depend. In the face of feared *hel am* attacks, herders thus affirm the values of pastoral livelihood and tighten the social relationships that they trust.

### **The importance of giving**

Since malicious gossip directly attacks the wealth that a household may have built up by harming its members or herd, envy is to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, acts of giving can be seen as essential to herding life beyond the visiting situations discussed above. For example, giving sustains the continuity of kinship in the sense of fathers separating their daughters from the patriclan (*ovog*) and giving them to the sons of others. Without such giving, households cannot generate descendants. Also, by carrying out daily offerings to spirits residing in the hearth of the *ger* and in the landscape, giving ensures the health and fertility of the herds. As herders offer milk, butter and fat to the ‘moody’ (*aashtai*) spirits, they hope to receive ‘blessings’ (*hishig*), which are considered necessary for a herd to grow. However, giving is fundamental not only to the reproduction of kinship and pastoral fortune, but also to Mongolian notions of personhood. Discussing funerary practices in Mongolia, Humphrey (2002) describes the danger involved when someone becomes so attached to an object that it excludes others (*horgodoson yum*). If upon death the soul (*süins*) of a person remains emotionally attached to one particular object and refuses to let it go, it may bring bad luck onto his or her relatives. Ritual intervention is therefore necessary in order to separate the soul from the object, dissolving the exclusive and possessive relationship. Achieving such separation, the object is then destroyed or given away, and a person and his or her soul (*süins*) can finally travel safely from this life to the next. In both life and death, refusing to give and let others have their share jeopardises peaceful living and is essentially seen as anti-social as well as anti-personal.

Although fundamental importance is attached to the act of giving, this does not mean that giving is necessarily altruistic. I suggest that the Mongolian way of giving, in which a patriarch decides autonomously to part with some of his household’s wealth, is not an example of a ‘free gift’ (cf.

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<sup>9</sup> *Üüniig medehiin ch arga baihgüi.*

Parry 1986). By showing generosity, the giver receives not only public acclaim and the blessings of spirits, but also herding assistance as a form of delayed reciprocity. Recipients of repeated generosity often assist the giving household in undesirable chores such as slaughtering animals, preparing hides and shearing sheep. In this sense, acts of giving assert hierarchical relationships within the household as well as far beyond it.

However, although what is given is sometimes reciprocated, it would be misleading to approach the generosity of herders in terms of the idiom of ‘exchange’<sup>10</sup>. ‘Exchange’ implies reciprocation (whether generalised or otherwise) and assumes that what is given is indeed meant, by the actors involved, to be reciprocated. Moreover, ‘exchange’ also implies that what is given is in fact reciprocated. Such an emphasis on bilateral expectations and interactions risks misconstruing what, for Mongolians, makes giving an act of generosity. I suggest that it is actually the dissociation between giving and reciprocating that makes generosity such a strain on households (Bourdieu 1977:14, 171). With this powerful obligation to be generous, it is difficult for a herder to avoid altogether situations where he is expected to give. At the time of my fieldwork, one of my host fathers had a peculiar strategy for negotiating the social expectations of generosity.

During any given day he spent most of his time away from the main *ger*, which guests associated with him, and instead slept, worked and relaxed in a small, dilapidated *ger* erected far behind it. When visitors arrived, they invariably asked where the household head was, and the reply was always the same: “he is out herding the sheep” (*honynd yavsan*), even when everyone knew that he was sitting in the other *ger*. In this way he evaded visitors and in particular their demands for his generosity. In his absence it became impossible for visitors to make requests and, even if they knew his ‘hiding place’, it would be considered rude for a visitor to enter his little *ger*. Such a *ger* is usually for storage or dairy production only and not for human habitation. It is also expected that a small *ger*, if inhabited, would be poorly decorated in terms of carpets and adornments, thus not appropriate for meeting a patriarch. In this way, the *ail* continued giving but balanced hospitality with carefully crafted restraint. In identifying the demands that are undesirable for the patriarch to attain to, he restricts his exposure to the financial requests of visitors and their potential for spreading malicious gossip.

I have so far shown how the possession of wealth gives rise to increasing social obligations and crystallises conflicting interests within the household group. Such careful negotiation between

generosity and restraint underscores the imperative balancing of interests, since the patriarch, according to Weber,

depends on the willingness of the group members to respect his authority, which he exercises on behalf of the group as a whole. The members of the household stand in an entirely personal relation to him. They obey him and he commands them in the belief that his right and their duty are part of an inviolable order that has the sanctity of immemorial tradition (Weber 1956, translated in Bendix 1998:331).

Since pastoral wealth in Uyanga is not considered an autonomous product of human labour but rather an intricate amalgamation of the human and spirit relations of the *ail*<sup>11</sup>, the generation of wealth forms a material expression and confirmation of the patriarch's general success. His wealth is a product of the peaceful relations with humans and spirits sustained in the past, while also providing a base from which he can assert his position within the local area. Receiving the blessings of spirits and witnessing the reproduction of kin groups and herds, the 'traditional authority' of the patriarch is confirmed in the present. Pastoral wealth is in this sense a material manifestation of both the subsistence economy of herders and the enduring position of patriarchs.

### **Concealing wealth**

In this section I will consider how wealth is produced in the mines. Focussing on economic circuits, this section builds upon the discussion in the previous chapter concerning the relationships that ninjas forge with neighbours and friends. By avoiding working and living with kinsmen and other relatives, I showed how ninjas limit social interactions with people who are part of an extensive kin hierarchy, requiring that they take up a subordinate position. The autonomous position of ninjas is enacted in daily social interactions with friends and evoked in the disrespectful joking that characterises relations of friendship. Whereas the previous chapter considered the sociality produced in the mines, this section asks how such relations are sustained economically.

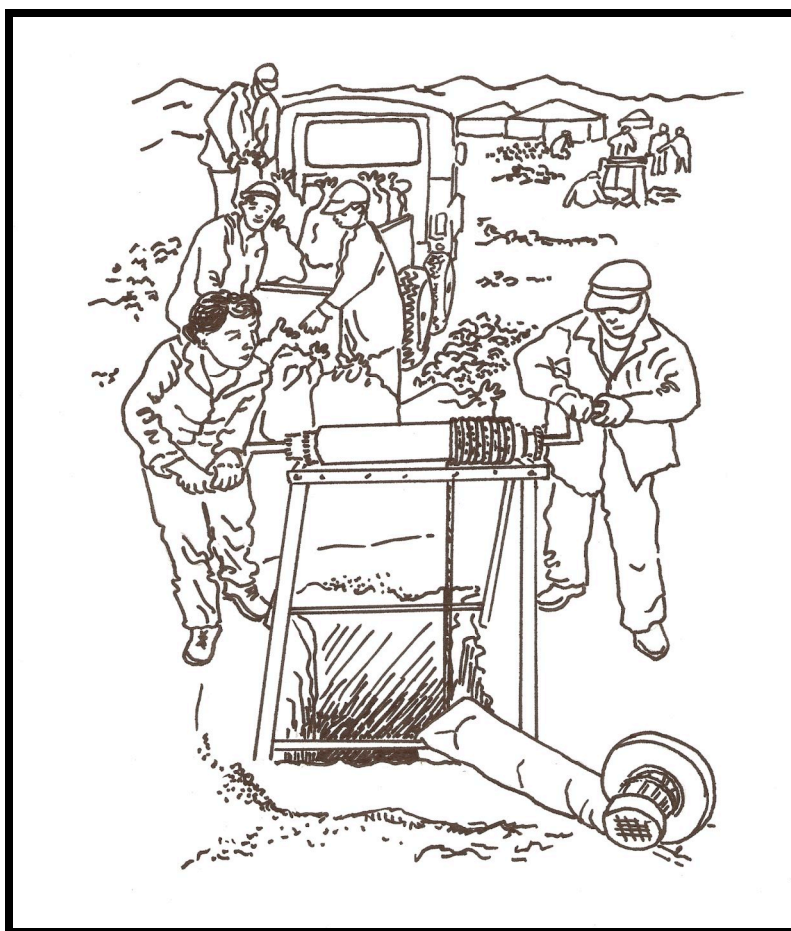
In the ninja mining areas, men and women work alongside each other in teams of varying sizes (see the previous chapter for a discussion of work relations). Depending on the location and size of the mining hole, work-teams number from four to sixteen, with some people working above ground and

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<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of worship at the 'Mother Rock', Humphrey (1993a:16) makes a similar argument about the inappropriateness of the idiom of 'exchange' for understanding Mongolian notions of human-spirit relations.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the perceived relationship between spirits and humans, see the following chapter.

others inside the mining hole. In some areas the gold-ore is deep underground, located at a depth of up to eighteen meters. To reach such a depth involves several weeks of hard manual labour. Equipped with only a self-made metal pick, miners scrape into the hard stony soil and fill tattered flour bags with gravel and dirt. As the miners slowly make their way into the underground, workers on the surface use a simple hand-crank pulley (*libotok*) to lift up the heavy bags and to transport workers up and down the hole at the change of shifts. When the miners reach the gold-ore, they dig horizontally to create a star-shape with several tunnels diverging off from the main shaft. All shafts are unsupported and air is most commonly led into the main shaft through a tube made of plastic bottles placed on top of each other with the top and bottom cut off.

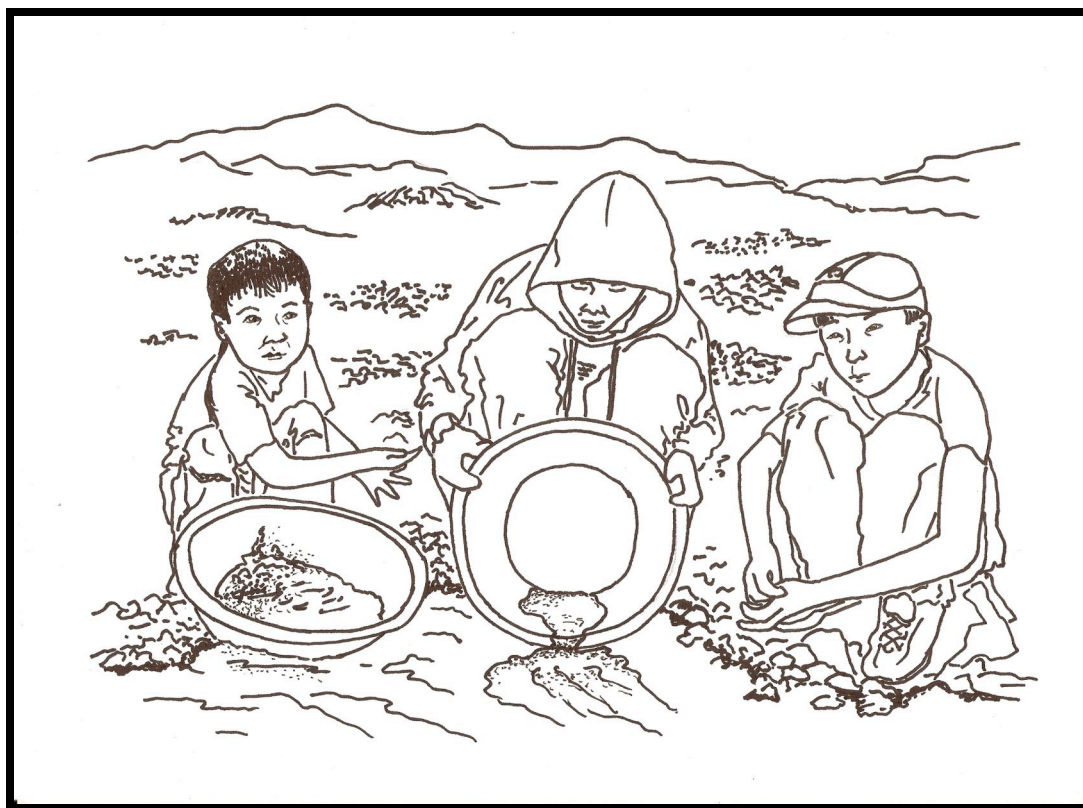


**Figure 4: Working at a mining hole**

If the mining shaft is far from a water source, so-called “dirt taxis” (*shoroony taksi*) are paid to take the bags from the mine to the water. Such a trip can transport up to twenty bags and costs the work-team 5000 *tügrüg*. If the mining shaft is near a water source, the workers on the surface simply carry their bags to the water to start the panning process. Plastic washing pans (*tumpun*), purchased in local *ger*-shops for 800 tg., are filled with gravel, submerged under water and swirled around in large circles. The larger stones are taken out and the pan is again submerged. The worker repeatedly



removes the largest gravel and eventually ends up with a fine mud containing some shiny particles, mostly the size of snowflakes. The worker licks his or her palm before carefully placing the gold flakes in it. Storing the gold in paper from cigarette boxes, the workers take their findings to the locally based gold traders (*altny chanj*) and exchange the “yellow stuff” (*shar yum*) for cash.



**Figure 5: Children panning for gold**

At the time of my fieldwork, ninjas sold 0.1 gram of gold for 1700 tg. The value of gold is calculated in the following way in the ninja mining areas in Uyanga:

1 *tsen*<sup>12</sup> = 3.8 grams = 66'000 tg.

1 *fün* = 0.4 grams = 6900 tg.

Monetary value = (66'000 tg./3800)\*weight of gold in mg.

From my observations among both miners and gold traders, I estimate that most miners earn a minimum of 5000 tg. per day. Compared to the national average monthly income of 41'000 tg.

<sup>12</sup> People also refer to the *lan* which is ten times the *tsen*, but is rarely used in daily life given its large quantity. For further details on these categories and the Mongolian gold trade, see Murray and Grayson (2003:43-44).

(Mongolian Statistical Yearbook 2005: 261)<sup>13</sup>, many miners earn a very attractive income that is comparable to those of white collar workers such as legislators, senior officials, managers and other professionals (ibid.:108). Considering the impact of accidents, illnesses and drinking on the working hours among miners, I estimate that their average monthly income to be at least 100'000 tg., thus 2.5 times the national average.



**Figure 6: Gold**

In addition to the simple and low investment panning technique, ninjas also procure gold in other ways. Another option is a soft plastic mat with small indentations (*erzen*), purchased locally for 15'000 tg. This mat is very popular as it makes the washing process much faster by lodging gold into its indented squares, thereby catching more gold. It is sometimes combined with other techniques such as a 'drum' (*pajur*) used in conjunction with a 'water canon' (*usan buu*). This mining technique consists of a manually modified metal drum with numerous holes, with a handle to turn it and a meshed slide coming off below the middle of the drum. One person turns the drum while two others feed it with gravel, and another directs the flow of the water from the water canon. Whilst the heavy stones are released through the holes in the drum, the smaller metals are lodged at the bottom of the drum. A slide, which is occasionally fitted with the above-mentioned plastic mats, catches the heaviest small particles while the lightest are pushed through with the flow of the mud. The drum costs about 160'000 tg. and the water canon with its diesel-fuelled generator (*pump*) costs at least 150'000 tg. By using this equipment, a team of at least four surface workers can process an amount of gravel equivalent to about seventy bags per day, earning an estimated minimum of

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<sup>13</sup> This amount is calculated from average income levels per household. According to the Yearbook, the national average household size in 2005 was 4.2 people. Since almost all members of a mining household contribute to its cash

15'000 tg. per day per person, whereas by panning by hand, one person can wash the content of no more than about ten bags per day.

As several different mining techniques are popular in Uyanga, it is impossible for almost anyone outside the individual work-team to know how much gold a person has found in a particular day. The variables are numerous and concern anything from the particular mining technique applied, the location of the mining shaft, to the precise organisation of the work-team. Firstly, as outlined above, miners use different kinds of equipment, which leads to variations in the length of work shifts, the number of workers involved and average recovery rates. Secondly, due to varying concentrations of gold-ore, some mining shafts yield much more gold than others, regardless of the technique used. Apart from these more general variables, profitability also depends on the depth and width of the mining shaft and the number of tunnels within it. All in all, this means that income levels are as hidden as the nature of the work itself. As the miners enter underground, so does the ability of others to ascertain how much gold they uncover. The covert quality of the mining process gives rise to an income that is non-visible and non-comparative. Unless miners directly enquire into each other's earnings, it is certain to remain unknown to people other than the miner.

In addition to the varying amounts of gold that miners uncover, they also spend their earnings in diverse ways. Upon selling their gold to resident gold-traders in the mines, most ninjas immediately spend part, if not all, of their earnings at local shops. As ninjas tend to work and socialise with neighbours and other friends, rather than kinsmen, they are often under little or no explicit obligation to share their earnings with others<sup>14</sup>. They can therefore decide relatively autonomously how to spend their money. Since a section of a gold-trader's *ger* usually functions as a small shop, most ninjas immediately relinquish part of their earnings to the gold-trader to buy some of the goods on display. Most of the products in the 'ger shops' (*geriin delgiüür*) are subsistence goods, such as pasta, rice, deep-fried bread and vegetables. However, customers also buy sweets, cigarettes, cheap vodka and Korean beer. At the end of a long workday, miners often buy alcohol and take it to a friend's *ger* where larger drinking sessions develop (see chapter six). It seems that, even if there is nothing to celebrate, there is almost always a reason to bury one's sorrow in drinking. In the ninja mining areas empty bottles cover the ground and drunken people can be seen throughout the day. Having carried out fieldwork with both ninjas and gold-traders, I estimate that alcohol is the single most common and financially significant expenditure in the mines.

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earnings, it is not surprising to find that the income per person is so much higher than the national average.

<sup>14</sup> Ninjas living in nuclear families share earnings and are expected to disclose willingly the income of the day. However, ninjas often try to spend at least a little before returning to the *ger*.



**Figure 7: A ger shop in the mines**

These ways of spending money earned from ninja mining are entirely private matters that are not visible, countable and comparable in the same way or to the same degree as the wealth of herders. With the absence of obvious material indicators of wealth in the mines, ninjas are not obligated, like herders are, to display or discuss their wealth. Consequently, when ninjas talk about and compare individuals who have been unusually lucky, such conversations never concern people who have made less than singular discoveries. Whilst ninjas are interested in the different luck (*az*) of particular people, they are rarely as openly interested in their wealth (*bayalag*)<sup>15</sup>. Since luck is recognised socially through elaborate celebrations following large gold discoveries, the value of the gold discovered is publicly proclaimed and relished, whereas mundane daily accumulations of wealth generally remain private. As with herders, ninjas insist that wealth is not merely a question of how good a miner you are. Since the spirits of the land bestow blessings (*hishig*) upon herders as well as miners, finding gold is not simply a practical task of digging deep holes and panning the gravel for gold flakes. Whilst knowledge of mining techniques and local geology may increase the chances of striking a gold vein, such insights alone are not seen as sufficient. Maintaining a good relationship with local spirits is thus paramount to success in mining. In this sense, ninjas may choose to keep information about wealth private not only due to the prevalence of violence in the

<sup>15</sup> When asking people about the idea of ‘luck’ (*az*), they explained that it was not related to any kind of spirit nor their blessings (*hishig*). Instead, luck was described as an entirely unpredictable and impersonal quality manifested in the result of actions.

mines, but also for reasons similar to those of herders. To talk about one's wealth is to disclose matters that are highly personal, powerful and uncertain.

Given the confidentiality that surrounds monetary wealth, visible and undeniable proof of ninja prosperity is often absent, and expectations of generosity therefore seldom become explicit demands. As such, monetary wealth does not necessarily lead to greater social obligations, but allows the miner a certain independence from others. This independence extends beyond the mines and accompanies the ninja on visits to his or her herding relatives. Not only is ninja wealth concealed and unpredictable, but with a cultural value attached to lying described in chapter two, a miner is under no obligation to honestly disclose actual earnings. When a miner visits relatives and is asked about how much money he or she has earned, the response becomes part of the domestic interlacing of lies and truths. If visiting parents, the miner is likely to discretely hand his or her mother a stack of dirty money, which is immediately hidden in the storage boxes (*avdar*) and not further commented on. The private quality of ninja wealth thus encompasses herding households, where it hides and blurs pastoral wealth from the view of others. Since the expectations of generosity and fears of envy are particularly pronounced in the herding areas, it is not surprising that many herders supplement their herding livelihood with a monetary income from the ninja mining areas. If a herding household has at least one family member who works in the mines, its wealth can no longer be measured by counting winter sheds and animals alone. Whether a herder is rich or not, then, becomes a guessing game as the expectation of receiving charitable loans and unmatched generosity is lowered and transferred onto other herders who have taken a different stance vis-à-vis ninja mining and accepted their necessary display of income.

However, such incorporation of ninja wealth into herding households has at least two further implications. Firstly, if the family member who is involved in ninja mining is not the household head, the individual autonomy made possible in the mines may create conflicts within the extended patriarchal household group. This is expressed clearly in the situation I described in chapter two concerning an aggressive argument which developed between a son, his wife and his father. The son lives with his wife and children in the mines where he works as a successful gold trader. With his high earnings, he has not only given substantial amounts of money to his parents, but he has also bought himself a Russian jeep, taken to expensive habits and built up an extensive network of friends with whom he often partakes in drinking sessions. Upon visiting the *ail* of his parents, he initiated an argument with his father, addressing him in ways that I have not experienced elsewhere on the steppe. The argument between father and son was rumoured across Uyanga for months, whispered to third-parties who shook their heads in disbelief upon hearing the story. Many local

herders expressed empathy with the father, commenting “what to do with a son like that?” (*iim hūüüg yaltai ch bilee*). Others blamed the father for not preventing the son from getting involved in ninja mining in the first place. Indeed, disintegrating households seemed to be a recognised cost of allowing children access to the mines.

Secondly, by permitting hidden ninja wealth into herding households, it becomes increasingly difficult for others to estimate the possessions of the *ail* and thus to use their black magic capabilities of malicious gossip. Although this may indeed be the desired outcome for the *ail*, it affects the household heads more generally by rendering them less powerful. If a growing number of herding households decide to incorporate mining wealth into their pastoral wealth, malicious gossip loses its base and is said to become ‘weak’ (*hüchtei bish*)<sup>16</sup>. This is because the accumulated insights of elder herders into local herding practices and the wealth of others would no longer be potent enough to instigate the malicious gossip. The failing powers of black magic has the potential to make possible a form of social life where people do not live in the fear expressed by my friend earlier in the chapter. Having lost two children and fearing for the life of her third, malicious gossip does not affect people’s lives lightly. However, according to the young and old, a life without any *hel am* does not provide much comfort either. The uncertainty of its alternative confronts herders with an anything but an easy situation.

## **Polluted money**

In this section I will continue my exploration into the intersections of local economic circuits. As wealth generated on the steppe and in the mines allows for different social relationships, I will consider the moral evaluations to which such wealth is subjected. By examining the cultural logics of pollution (*buzar*<sup>17</sup>), I will show how ideas about polluted money are closely tied up with attempts to demarcate the spheres within which certain kinds of wealth can circulate. As people take part in the highly intertwined local economic circuits, I suggest that they also strive ideologically and ritually to assert the separation of such circuits.

Both herders and ninjas describe money earned from mining as ‘polluted’ (*buzartai*). Having polluted money can harm its holder, and unless such money is ‘cleansed’ (*ariulah*), its holder may

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<sup>16</sup> Whilst the technique of malicious gossip is said to be weakening, it is also possible to see such comments as post-rationalisations on the ability of some people to continue to evade expectations of generosity and accumulate wealth.

<sup>17</sup> *Buzar* carries meanings such as ‘dirt’, ‘filth’ and ‘defilement’ (Bawden 1997:65). Considering the general cultural framework invoked by *buzar*, I also translate the term as ‘pollution’.

suffer illness and general misfortune (*muu yum garah*). In order to cleanse money, people usually recite mantras (*unshlaga unshih*) and burn incense (*utlaga asaah*). However, if the person has suffered much misfortune, such purification of money is best carried out by a ritual specialist, either in the mines or in the village. Also, if the person has been particularly lucky and found large amounts of gold, the money earned should also be cleansed by a specialist<sup>18</sup>. There are numerous shops in both the village and the mines selling ritual objects, and itinerant traders often pass through Uyanga to sell items that either increase luck (*az*) or cleanse money<sup>19</sup>. I was told that money earned from mining should never be invested in animals or other durable wealth objects. Instead it is best spent on fleeting subsistence goods and alcohol by the person who originally earned the money<sup>20</sup>. Although it is possible to cleanse polluted money, both herders and miners insisted that such transformation was never certain. Even if a well-respected Buddhist lama carried out elaborate purification rituals, the money earned from mining could still be ‘contaminated’ and affect its holder negatively. However, some people claimed to take the risk, yet only on the condition that such cleansed ninja wealth was not invested in any durable object or animal. Instead, they would spend the money on a daughter’s education in the capital city or on a much needed operation at the hospital. That is, they would transact cleansed ninja money for transformative processes only.

The intense drinking which takes place in the mines, I suggest, is an example of spending polluted money in locally accorded ways. As such, drinking is not simply a way of momentarily forgetting about the harsh working conditions and personal injuries that come with mining. In social drinking situations ninjas engage in a particular kind of giving that leaves no other traces of wealth than drunkenness and vague memories of circulating vodka bottles. The generous giver swiftly opens his or her bottle and passes it around to others who will then serve it to the group. Whilst drinking among herders is highly formal and ritualised with explicit hosts and guests, discussed extensively in chapter six, drinking among ninjas does not involve the same degree of structured formality. This means that the identity of the giver in a ninja drinking situation does not endure in any social or material sense. By giving alcohol, ninjas thus give without necessarily being marked as generous. Ninja drinking not only sustains less hierarchical relations, but also ensures that the consumption of polluted money is socially and materially transient.

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<sup>18</sup> It was explained to me that such specialist intervention was necessary due to the amount of money earned.

<sup>19</sup> Such items include little stone turtles, necklaces made in different stones for each birth year, and little frog sculptures, made in Chinese coins (*zoos*). The most popular item was three overlapping Chinese coins, strung together with a red ribbon (*helhsen gurban zoos*).

<sup>20</sup> Although such opinions about transient and ego-oriented ninja wealth would seem like moral attacks favoured by herders, both herders and miners describe money earned from mining in this way.



The attempt to divert ‘*buzar*’, ensuring that it does not endure materially or socially, is not limited to ideas about polluted money. Indeed, the undesirability and even fear of *buzar* surrounds all kinds of objects. In daily language the term *buzar* can be used in similar ways to the word for ‘rubbish’ (*hog*) and denotes something as filthy and disgusting. It is commonly applied as an adjective, yet is only used with particular nouns such as shoes, used tissue paper, dogs and human blood. Other nouns such as hats, hair, horses and milk are never described as ‘*buzartai*’. If such an adjective is applied to these latter nouns, people are likely to react with a mixture of surprise, confusion and not least anger. The notion of *buzar* is an essential organising principle that is both manifestly concrete and cosmologically abstract. As it divides the clean from the dirty, it similarly separates the upper from the lower, the male from the female, the orderly from the wild (Lindskog 2000). Whilst such divisions are most strongly asserted within the domestic space of a *ger* (Humphrey 1974), they are also apparent in many other aspects of social life. The notion of *buzar* informs ideas about posture, movement and speech, giving rise to elaborate and enduring ‘techniques of the body’ (Lacaze 2006). If such separations are not adhered to, people fear that the filth may harm them. Illnesses are thus often seen as caused by exposure to something *buzartai* (cf. Clark 1993)<sup>21</sup>. Although pollution can affect all members of a household group, women and children are considered particularly vulnerable. Protective bracelets and necklaces are therefore worn at all times, often in junction with birth year or Buddhist deity necklaces. Every evening women and children in my host families circled burning incense (*arts*) three times clockwise around their bodies in order to ‘protect’ (*hamgaalah*) them from ‘polluting things’ (*buzartai yum*). The notion of *buzar* is thus not merely a descriptive label of impurity, but also the organising principle behind a more general cultural framework that makes daily life human.

By ritually and ideologically separating polluted money from other kinds of wealth, distinct spheres of exchange emerge. However, as the ritual conversion of polluted money is not guaranteed to be sufficient, transactions involving money earned from the mines are always accompanied by fears of its potentially harmful consequences. Ninja money never completely escapes its origin, forcing its holder to contemplate the implications of his or her exposure to its pollution. When herders sell milk in the mines and return to their *ails* with stacks of muddy money notes, they have to consider how to spend the money earned. Will it fund the future purchases of bottled vodka, or will the recited mantras cleanse it of its pollution? By taking part in local economic circuits, ninja money is

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<sup>21</sup> Clark (1993) describes a similar scenario where male gold miners in Papua New Guinea are seen to suffer a high incidence of illness due to their transgression of taboos. As they expose themselves to women and interact with international mining companies, male miners break down fundamental ideas about social order and are seen as being punished in return.



transacted and its *buzar* extends its harmful reach through an increasing number hands. As wealth is circulated, so is pollution. The more herders sell their subsistence products to ninjas, the more they receive polluted monetary wealth. As such, the notion of polluted money can be seen to emphasise the importance of continuing a predominantly subsistence-oriented production rather than selling its produce as market commodities. Such lines of analysis may seem similar to Taussig's (1980) study of the dangers involved in leaving behind the pre-capitalist peasant economy and entering the capitalist world of exchange value. However, in Uyanga it is only monetary exchanges with ninjas that are considered polluting – not market exchange in general. By marking separate spheres within which certain kinds of wealth can be exchanged, different moral values are attached to the transactions. Represented as dangerous, heavy and polluted, ninja wealth is best marginalised and isolated from other transactions. Given its potential to harm people, in particular those who ensure the perpetuity of the patriclan (*ovog*), polluted money not only prevents material permanence but also social continuity.

Looking further afield, Mongolian notions of polluted money seem similar to the notion of 'bitter money' described by Shipton (1989) in his study of the Luo of Kenya. When the Luo ignore sales taboos and sell items such as land, gold and ritual tobacco, which are associated with ancestors and local spirits, the money they earn is considered 'bitter' and 'evil'. Such money must be kept separate from transactions involving permanent lineage wealth, in particular livestock and bridewealth. When tabooed items are sold, the ancestral spirits become upset and enforce misfortune such as illness or death on the seller himself or his close relatives. As the Luo are said to value egalitarian relations in which wealth is shared, Shipton argues that such tabooed sales produce "a 'private pocket syndrome', in which family members lose collective control over family wealth" (Shipton 1989:52). Betraying both ancestors and family, the notion of 'bitter money' points to the refusal among the Luo to accept the possessive individualism that money has enabled. As such, both the Mongolians and the Luo mark certain kinds of money as contrary to the maintenance of a stable and enduring social order. Threatening the kin groups and their visible wealth, bitter and polluted money is forced, through ritual conversion practices, to shed its individualising potential and become part of the collective wealth of families. However, whereas the state currency among the Luo is bound up with memories of recent colonial exploitation (*ibid.*:22), money in Mongolia does not share the same past. As a result, whilst money seems a conducive and readily available vehicle for the Luo expression of betrayal, the same cannot be said about the Mongolian case as I will explore in the following section.

## Money and gold in historical perspective

Although money is always concealable and private, it is not similarly regarded as invariably polluted. Indeed, herders and ninjas alike earn money and use it in transactions. It is only money earned from mining that is considered dangerous. Since *buzar* is usually considered an inherent and constant quality of the object in question, the pollution of money points our attention in a different direction. In order to better understand why money earned in the mines is considered polluted, I will in this section begin an examination of the broader cosmology within which gold mining is carried out. Focusing on the historical use of state currencies and gold in Mongolia<sup>22</sup>, I will show that it is not money *per se* that gives rise to particular ideas about polluted wealth. This is not a Marxist scenario where money constitutes ‘the root of all evil’, alienating the worker from recognising his or her own exploitation. Nor is this a situation akin to that described by Bohannan regarding the Tiv where the introduction of money, “one of the shatteringly simplifying ideas of all time” (Bohannan 1959:503), is seen to erode the culturally rich traditional society, turning it into another indistinct example of modern civilisation. Rather, I will suggest that it is local ideas about gold that contribute to the view that money earned from gold mining is polluted.

In the Mongolian cultural region, money of various kind has circulated for more than a millennium. Despite the numerous dynasties, empires and khanates of the Inner Asian region, archaeological excavations reveal a remarkable variation in and continuous presence of State currencies. The Uighur kingdom of Turfan (10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century AD.) in today’s Inner Mongolia had a central role in regional and transcontinental trade (Atwood 2004:563). As currency they used cloth bolts, which were stamped with the seal of the Uighur khan and renewed every seven years. When Chinggis Khan united the Mongols in 1206, his empire did not at first issue local currency, and as late as the mid13th century the Uighur cloth bolts still circulated in areas stretching from today’s Mongolia to the Black Sea. It was not until the reign of Ögedei Khan (1229-1241) that the Mongol administration began issuing paper currency backed by silk reserves and introduced local taxation (Atwood 2004:361). Eventually, in 1925, the Mongolian monetary standard of the *tögrög* (lit. ‘round’) was introduced. It was created by the joint Soviet-Mongolian Bank of Trade and Industry and was originally convertible to silver coins. However, already in 1929 the government cancelled its convertibility due to inflation. Despite periods of soaring inflation, especially in the early

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<sup>22</sup> This and the following section draws in part from material analysed in my MPhil Thesis, entitled “Golden Ambiguities: A study of gold mining in Mongolia through history” (Jensen 2004). My MPhil thesis was centrally concerned with the relationship between the general condemnation of gold mining in the Mongolian cultural region and the ideology of Soviet industrialisation.

1990s<sup>23</sup>, the *tögrög* has been in continuous circulation ever since. State currencies in general are thus not new to the Mongolians and the *tögrög* has endured drastic political changes and economic challenges.

In order to understand the notion of ‘polluted money’, it is therefore necessary to move beyond an exclusive focus on the circulation of State currencies. Since polluted money arises from transacted gold, I will consider the relationship between gold and money, in particular the extent to which such currencies can aptly convey the value of gold. Since Western missionaries presumed a correlation between gold and money in their visits to the khans of the Mongol Empire, I will briefly examine historical material concerned with the period of the thirteenth century.

When the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck (Dawson 1980b) travelled through Inner Asia in the middle of the thirteenth century, he was struck by the attitude of the Mongols to precious metals. Whilst other peoples in the region had willingly accepted gold and silver as a means of payment, the Mongols did not want to receive it, nor exchange anything in return<sup>24</sup>.

The meat they had brought we kept until the day of the feast; for we could find nothing for sale for gold or silver, only for cotton or other materials, and we had none of these (Dawson 1980b:110).

Although Marco Polo mentions how gold was used to support paper currencies during the reign of Hung-Wu (1368-1398) in today’s China (Benedetto 1931:147-150), gold was not endowed with the same properties among the Mongols. This refusal to accept precious metals from foreigners, however, did not entail a complete refusal among the Mongols to use gold and silver. Indeed, gold was a primary object of regional and long-distance trade (Per K. Sørensen, personal communication). In the thirteenth century, the Mongol rulers had a great desire for gold, in particular gold brocade textiles, which they acquired mainly as booty and tribute from conquered territories (Cleaves 1982:214). Upon the conquest of Baghdad in 1258, for example, the booty was so great that the Mongols

sank under the weight of the gold, silver, gems and pearls, the textiles and precious garments, the plates and vases of gold and silver, for they only took those two metals (Allsen 1997:28).

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<sup>23</sup> The rate of inflation peaked in 1992 with 325% a year (Griffin 2003:2)

<sup>24</sup> See the vivid account of Rubruck’s conversation with Mangu Khan who takes offence at Rubruck’s reference to precious metals as suitable gifts to the Khan (Dawson 1980a:ch. 28).

One of the most spectacular uses of gold was as decoration for the great tents of the khans, princes and high officials. Many sources describe how the entire interior of the “palace tent” (*ordon ger*), founded by Ögedei, was made of gold, even down to the use of gold nails (Boyle 1971, Dawson 1980a). The tent was furnished with gold furniture and the walls were decorated with gold plates. The higher the political status of the resident, the more gold the tent would contain. However, as many of these impressive tents lacked a felt exterior, they were unsuitable for living and were evidently made primarily for display.

The rulers themselves were lavishly clad in gold brocade, extending from gold shoes and headdresses to impressive ceremonial robes that were made of gold thread (Fontein 1999). However, the precious textile was not only worn by rulers, but also bestowed onto their officials for public occasions as well as used for frequent grants of raiment to foreign visitors, outstanding clerics and others. Although gold robes were given out to the subordinates of rulers, it was only the ruler himself who was accompanied by the precious metal through life and death. According to the strict prescriptions for royal burials, gold and gold brocade were implicated in every single act of the funerary practices, and the burials were said to be “veritable treasure houses” (Dawson 1980a:13).

This preoccupation with gold among the Mongol rulers, according to Allsen (1997), reflects the “deep and specific cosmological meaning” that “gold as a substance and a colour” possesses for the Mongols (ibid.:61). Gold was not simply a symbol of power, indexing rank and authority, but essentially a substance that conferred cosmological order. Indeed, since gold was considered heavy and dangerous, most people could not endure its presence. However, rulers were seen to have a mandate from *Tenger* (the Sky), endowing them with extraordinary insights and capabilities. As described by Allsen (1983),

As justification for their claims, the Mongols invoked a heavenly mandate, which they alleged gave them the right, and indeed the duty, to bring the entire world under their sway. Evidence for this claim they found in the good fortune that accompanied Chinggis Khan through many perilous times (Allsen 1983:268).

Rulers can thus be seen to visibly demonstrate their cosmological powers by asserting their resilience towards the dangerous materiality of gold. As rulers acquired, used and gave away the precious metal, its handling was considered an exclusive matter for the imperial authority. When

foreigners presented the Mongols with gold, it aroused anger and inhospitality. Since the colour of gold was in the past as well as today commonly associated with ‘imperial authority’, ‘the sacred’, and ‘the cosmos’ (Allsen 1997:93, Park 1998:ch. 1.), such prestations might have been received as rivalling counter-claims to political, if not cosmological, power. Although money circulated in the Mongol Empire, gold was not considered one such currency. Indeed, given its symbolic and cosmological exclusivity, gold can be seen as the antithesis to the general purpose money that travelling missionaries mistook it to be.

Even though the historical material discussed concerns the thirteenth century, I believe it reveals ideas about gold that are still expressed today in the notion of ‘polluted money’. Just as the Mongol rulers insisted on gold’s exclusivity in the face of counter-claims made by travelling visitors, Mongols today emphasise the impending pollution in cases where the separate spheres of exchange are breached. Gold is a unique metal, which carries immense symbolic and cosmological power. By classifying money earned from mining as polluted, herders and ninjas can thus be seen to ideologically continue the historical insistence on the exclusivity of gold at a time of a large-scale gold rush.

### **The dangers of gold mining**

Although the Mongols had a great desire for gold, there are few historical references to gold mining carried out on Mongol lands. This is despite the fact that Inner Asia is immensely rich in precious metals and gem stones, which the Mongols acquired through trade and booty. By examining the ways in which Mongols historically reacted to local gold miners, I will in this section argue that the notion of ‘polluted money’ reflects not only particular ideas about gold, but also the act of its extraction.



**Figure 8: Mining in Uyanga**

In 1844, the Lazarist missionary of Évariste-Régis Huc and his companion Gabet were sent to explore the newly created apostolic vicariate of Mongolia. Although the region was well endowed with natural riches such as gold and silver, he notes how a “rigorous prohibition to work these mines” (Huc 1937:20) was in place. However, occasionally the kingdom of Ouniot was targeted by large bands of Chinese outcasts who forced their way into the interior of the underground<sup>25</sup>. Word of the abundant riches passed quickly from mouth to mouth, and the area soon became home to thousands of fortune hunters. Whilst some of them worked in the mines, others pillaged surrounding districts. Lawlessness reigned as the gold miners exercised their fearful sway. This state of disorder culminated when the Queen of Ouniot had to pass through the “valley of gold”. She was held up by gold miners and ordered to hand over her jewels.

Upon her return home she reproached the King bitterly for his cowardice. At length, stung by her words, he assembled the troops of his two banners and marched against the miners. The engagement which ensued was for a while doubtful, but at length the miners were driven in by the Tartar cavalry, who massacred them without mercy. The bulk of the survivors took refuge in the mine. The Mongols blocked up the apertures with huge stones. The cries of the despairing wretches within were heard for days and then ceased forever. Those of the miners who were taken alive had their eyes put out and were dismissed (ibid.:22-23).

Ignoring the prohibitions on mining, the outcasts not only searched for gold, but were also seen as creating a state of lawlessness and social disorder. As the gold was unearthed, an inversion of society was established where it was the outcasts who ruled and the imperial authority who was pillaged. When the king reclaimed the land, the miners were punished with such severity and brutality that his enforcement of power seemed aimed to restore more than his challenged authority. Given the close association between gold, imperial authority and the cosmos, the king may have been striving to restore not only the social but indeed also the cosmological order.

Another account of gold mining is described in a travel account by a young Danish doctor after his experiences in Siberia and Mongolia in the early twentieth century. He had lived in Siberia for six years when he heard a story about how locals had murdered a Russian man named Jakob, his maid and Chinese assistant following their attempts to mine for gold. When the Dane subsequently travelled to Mongolia, he met an old one-eyed bear hunter who told him more about the killing of Jakob after he had mined at the place where “evil spirits reign” (Krebs 1937:73).

It was not until a couple of days into our acquaintance, that he [the bear hunter] told me the story. Two young Buryats who often enjoyed a cup of tea with Jakob, offered him a wild boar that they had just shot. It was lying a bit up the mountainside in the forest. When they had walked far enough away so that the shot could not be heard from the hut, they shot him [*Jakob*]. Afterwards, they walked back down and shot the Chinese [assistant] who was washing gold by the river. Only the girl was left then. Instead of wasting cartridges on her, they stabbed her to death (Krebs 1937:73-74, my translation).

The axiom of foreigners mining for gold and local people punishing their actions in a dramatic manner appears to be prevalent in historical as well as recent narratives of gold mining in the Mongolian cultural region<sup>26</sup>. By casting the miners as foreigners who do not merely come from different parts of the country, but from different countries altogether, this narrative reinforces the image of the miners’ actions as profoundly transgressive and disorderly<sup>27</sup>. Whilst the next chapter will consider in further detail the cosmology within which such views of mining are positioned, at present it suffices to remark on the striking near-universality of such perceptions of mining

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<sup>25</sup> The account provided by Huc might not be strictly reliable, especially given his reference to a place which does not appear to exist. Nevertheless, his account expresses likely Mongol views.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Ossendowski’s (1923) account of people mining despite warnings from local lamas, or the description by Montagu (1956:77) of the refusal among Mongols to work in the Soviet mines (see Introduction).

<sup>27</sup> Although the act of mining appears condemned, metal work in iron, copper and bronze was prevalent in the region (Vainshtein 1980:200).

activities. To consider the act of mining subversive of cosmological order is not unique to the Mongols, but rather seems to be part of a much more general understanding of the human predicament. The work by Sallnow (1989) in the town of Qamawara in the Peruvian Andes provides a clear example of this close link often made between precious metals, imperial rulers and the cosmos.

In the Andes the mountains are considered the abodes of spiritual guardians who provide humans with the fertility and protection on which their lives depend. In order to maintain their support, periodic offerings have to be carried out. Since the underground palaces of the nature spirits are seen to be furnished with precious metals, practices of mining entail a constant risk of losing lives when confronted with the wrath of the spirits. This anger stems from the view that mining not only involves theft from the spirits' palaces, but also of precious tribute that was intended to flow from the local spirits to the secular state. Just as the local inhabitants of Qamawara find themselves part of an extensive hierarchy of power, encompassing mayors, councillors and constables, the local spirits "with their regional counterparts lying further afield key in directly with the structure of the state" (Sallnow 1989:218). The precious metals of gold and silver thus flow from humans' offerings through the local spirits to the most powerful regional spirits who finally offer it to the government of the republic. By deflecting this flow of tribute to the spirits, miners are therefore seen to subvert the supernatural world and the established secular power of the state authorities.

Apart from recognising the historical interest of imperial rulers in precious metals, Sallnow's account also brings attention to the symbolic capacity of mining to represent challenges to secular power. The penetration of the ground, the unearthing of its core and the individual accumulation of wealth emerge as strong symbols that readily capture the imagination of not only the Qamawaran, but indeed also the Mongols<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, the ready physicality of such actions, I suggest, transcends their symbolic capacity and confronts people with an immediate experience of the disruption and subversion that miners effect within their surroundings. The scarred landscape of the mines is thus not only a powerful symbol, but indeed also a physical testament to their threatening and, at worst, destructive individuality. Seen in this light, the notion of 'polluted money' becomes an attempt to marginalise the cosmologically problematic wealth creation that takes place in the mines. As the circulation of polluted money is associated with a single transactional sphere, its transgressive movement between spheres is tinted with fear and suspicion for its potential implications. By associating such wealth with *buzar*, the notion of 'polluted money' enforces a



moral separation of such wealth from that created by involvement in other economies. Within this moral universe of exchange, the profits sustained by ninja mining are thus labelled as perilous and ultimately profoundly anti-social. Faced with thousands of miners digging into the ground and turning gold into personal profits, the notion of ‘polluted money’ can thus be seen as an attempt to “maintain a static and timeless order” (Bloch and Parry 1989:24), which transcends the actions of transient individuals. In this sense, I suggest that the politics of wealth and envy in Uyanga are not simply about creating a local topography of wealth or discovering the position of others in a collective race for affluence. Rather, the daily conversations about the wealth of others are concerned with nothing less than ensuring an enduring social and cosmological order within which human life can be lived. That such an order may grant patriarchs continuing claims to the power of black magic may be considered an advantageous ‘by-product’ for local herders. However, as I will show in the following chapter, patriarchs are not the only ones who lay claim to such powerful capabilities. Although the notion of ‘polluted money’ indeed seems ideologically forceful, it does not prevent ninjas from possessing insights about other forms of black magic.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined local ideas about wealth and particularly the notion of ‘polluted money’. As wealth among herders is largely visible, countable and comparable, I have suggested that it amounts to a material manifestation of the success of the household head and provides a firm basis for visitors’ expectations of his generosity. As a result of the cultural value attached to the act of giving, a household head must carefully negotiate the extent to which he attends to the interests of other household members and limit his charity accordingly. If feelings of envy are stirred, the visitor may attack the household and its herd through ‘malicious gossip’. Since the potency of such black magic capabilities is considered dependent on the degree of detailed knowledge about the wealth of *ails*, patriarchs are in effect the only ones capable of inflicting such harm. However, as local herders take up ninja mining and earn concealable money, their wealth becomes increasingly hidden and unpredictable. As a result, in the face of local herders’ involvement in ninja mining, the power of ‘malicious gossip’ is said to wither. Although ninja mining thus provides herders with a new way of concealing their wealth and thereby escape the pressure to give, it also erodes the patriarchs’ claims to powers in black magic. The burden of patriarchy can therefore be disputed through the involvement of either local patriarchs or indeed other household members in ninja

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<sup>28</sup> Mongols also have an idea of ‘hells’ (*tam*), located below the earth. However, when discussing the dangers of gold mining, people did not refer to *tam* but to spirits (see following chapter).

mining. Patriarchs are thus presented with a difficult decision for how to ensure the enduring reproduction of their *ails* when faced with a local gold rush. Whereas the economies of herding and mining at first appear distinct and unrelated, my analysis has shown that they are overlapping local economic circuits with competing claims to black magic power.

This mutuality of local economies is forcefully separated through the notion of ‘polluted money’. Although money is a key part of both pastoral and ninja wealth, it is only money earned from mining that is considered ‘heavy’, ‘dangerous’ and ‘polluted’. Whilst such money can be ritually cleansed, its purification is never certain and its potential to inflict harm on its holder may thus persist. Despite an elaborate cultural principle involving the notion of *buzar*, I have shown how it is rather ideas about gold and gold mining specifically that give rise to the notion of ‘polluted money’. By marking ninja wealth and ideologically separating the interconnected economic circuits of the herding and mining areas, I have argued that the notion of ‘polluted money’ marginalises the socially and even cosmologically subversive acts of mining. ‘Polluted money’ thus reveals more about the contested and historically contextualised place of gold mining than it does about either pollution or money.

Taking a few steps back, the same material also suggests another scenario. That is, the notion of ‘polluted money’ can be seen to convey not only local people’s attempt to marginalise ninja mining and the wealth it generates, but also a crumbling nation state that is losing its hold on its population. As Mongolia is part of a post-socialist generation of ‘weak’ states, ninja mining can be said to reflect the inability of the state to enforce its laws and provide for its people. With growing numbers of unemployed people seeking to work in the mines, ‘polluted money’ can be seen as a political commentary on the failure of the past decade of shock-therapy and its neo-liberal policies. By marginalising ninja wealth from other spheres of exchange, local people distance themselves from the uncontrolled and unlicensed mines that are borne out of the formal mining sector. However, herders and miners alike have never voiced such a reading. Although ninja mining with its extraction of wealth from unlicensed territory implies an aspect of illegality, herders and miners rarely describe ninja mining as a criminal or state-subversive offence. That is, although ninja mining may reflect a ‘weak’ state, it is not locally described in such terms. Moreover, it would not help explain why other informal sector economies in Mongolia are not seen as similarly generating ‘polluted money’ (Lars Højer and Signe Gundersen, personal communication). Rather than forming part of a general critique of ‘weak’ states, I have in this chapter demonstrated the socio-historical specificity of the current modes of wealth production in Uyanga. In the following chapter I will consider how these changing economic practices are conceived within local cosmology.

## Chapter 5: Changing Spiritual Landscapes

### Introduction

It was at the height of summer and my host sister and I were about to start the usual round of milking the mares. It suddenly started raining hard and we all hurried inside the *gers* to wait for the rain to stop. However, the noise grew in force and we soon realised that the sky had opened up for a heavy hailstorm. Staring across the steppe through the open door, I could see hail the size of large coins hitting the ground. Within minutes the surrounding mountains became winter-white and the steppe covered in a thick layer of ice. The horses outside were going crazy and we feared for the safety of our animals. “How long will this hailstorm last? What about our poor lambs? And Tömörchödör, he is still out herding the sheep...Why has he not come back yet?” mum whispered to herself. She got up, filled the ladle with fresh milk and hurried outside. She threw the milk towards the sky, mumbled some words and hurried back in. She did this twice before the hailstorm finally began to subside a little. After half an hour of thundering hail, the sky cleared and the hailstorm stopped. My host brother eventually appeared, bruised badly by the hail but managing okay. All our animals, even the newborn lambs, had survived the hailstorm. When I asked my father what had caused the bad weather, he replied: “It was *tenger* who wanted to wash the ground, the animals, everything. By having thirty minutes of hail, all the filth (*buzar*) and garbage (*hog*) have been pushed away, leaving the ground clean (*tsever*) and peaceful (*taivan*). Basically *tenger* was just cleaning up everything. It’s very good once or twice a year”.

A couple of days later I went to the mining areas with my brother to sell milk. I noticed how the outer fabric of most *gers* (*geriin bürees*) was completely torn to pieces and the usual few makeshift plastic tents were gone. We were told that the hailstorm had hit the mines severely with terrible consequences. “Hail the size of eggs came down here! It destroyed *ger* covers and even shattered the windshields of several cars! Can you imagine that?! It was awful!”, an elderly woman exclaimed. Following deep sighs and long pauses, several people agreed: “*Tenger* sure was angry! (*Tenger uurlasan shüü*<sup>1</sup>)”. In the weeks following the hailstorm, both herders and miners referred to the adverse weather as a warning sign of *Tenger*’s anger against the persisting mining activities in

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<sup>1</sup> The verb *uurlah* carries meanings such as ‘to be angry’, ‘to get angry’ (Bawden 1997:392). Such anger can be seen as a positive or justified anger.

the area. As elder male herders frequently remarked: “That’s why the hails were much bigger in the mines! *Tenger* took its anger out on ninjas because they refuse to show respect”<sup>2</sup>.

In this chapter I will examine how changing interactions with the landscape are conceived within local cosmology. Since people hold multiple and often mutually incongruent beliefs in invisible entities, I do not attempt to distil a singular coherent ‘world view’ (see also Humphrey and Onon 1996). Instead, by taking seriously the broad range of local ideas concerning spirits and their agency, I am interested in what religious beliefs may tell us about the ways in which people interact differently with their shared human and non-human surroundings. By approaching religious ideas as not merely reflective of or ephemeral to human sociality but indeed as active constituents of social life, I will suggest that cosmologies pertaining to the landscape play a key role in negotiating gendered hierarchies and local participation in new economic practices.

By comparing the spirits that inhabit the steppe to those in the mines, I will show that whilst spirits are often described locally as epiphenomena of human attention to fundamental taboos, they also facilitate assertions of power. Whilst the spirits of the steppe areas consolidate patriarchal power, I suggest that ninjas achieve individual power by interacting with the mining landscape and its new spirits. The anger of spirits is thus not only measured punishment for disrespectful conduct, as the herders in the above vignette are so quick to point out, but indeed also a powerful ‘substance’ which ninjas can potentially direct at others through black magic rituals. Since herders consider ninjas to be capable of carrying out such black magic, which is believed to be much more powerful than their own ‘malicious gossip’ (*hel am*) (see chapter four), they constantly fear the power of ninjas. If herders do not accept ninjas’ claims to autonomy, their households risk becoming victims of black magic. The manipulation of spirits’ anger carried out by ninjas against patriarchal herding households thus appears similar to anthropological accounts of ‘spirits of resistance’ (Boddy 1989, Comaroff 1985, Ong 1987). However, I contend that such a view privileges the experiences and complaints of herding patriarchs above those of ninjas. Given the secrecy surrounding insights into black magic and the few cases of actual attacks, it is not clear the extent to which ninjas indeed engage in such black magic practices. It is thus herders’ fears of ninja black magic, rather than explicit cases of attack, that allow ninjas to assert power and autonomy. Interacting differently with the landscape and its new spirits thus strengthens ninjas’ independence from extended kin groups.

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<sup>2</sup> *Tiim uchraas shoroony gazart orson möndör mash tom baina. Ted хүндэтгэггүй багаагаас Төнгөр хилэгнэlee нинжа нар deer gargaj baina.*

In Mongolian language there is no single word that carries a similar meaning to the English word ‘spirit’. Invisible, yet localised agents are always referred to with their particular classificatory name, such as king of the water (*usan khan*), the Sky (*Tenger*) and the like. Most spiritual beings are seen to occupy specific domains, such as forests, mountain tops or hearths in *gers*. As people go about their daily lives and carry out tasks within the landscape, they are thus likely to interact with a multitude of different spirits.



**Figure 9: The landscape of the steppe**

However, the visible physicality of the landscape masks the conceptual discontinuities between its entities. As Humphrey and Onon (1996) describe among the Daur of Inner Mongolia,

the main categories used for thinking about the world, such as the sky, mountains, rivers, humans, or animals, were curiously disconnected in Daur discourse, and each was attributed with their own kind of causal realm. The Daur had no all-explanatory and widely accepted creation myths that might have related the various parts of a cosmology to one another (ibid.:76).

With spirits residing seemingly everywhere, it is not surprising that a local herder described the masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*) to me in this way: “They can see everything you do, they know

everything you do. They are like politicians, where the governors of *bags*, *sums* and *aimags* all talk with the politicians in Ulaanbaatar<sup>3</sup>. In this way politicians know everything. That's also how it is with the masters of the land". In everyday practice and conversation, spirits are thus markedly distinct, numerous and omnipresent.

Such a 'particularised' domain of invisible entities may explain the local absence and inappropriateness of a term that groups together in a single collectivity the broad range of spirits<sup>4</sup>. The extent to which spirits are perceived as 'particular agents' is expressed in daily language, where most terms for spiritual beings are composite nouns referring to explicit human-like agents, such as masters and kings. These terms have direct parallels to the colloquial classification of human power holders. Recognising these discursive processes of particularisation and humanisation, coupled with constant practical interactions in specific localities with invisible entities, I will use the term 'spirit' to convey an invisible, localised entity who 1) has a non-human origin; 2) can influence the human condition and 3) can be addressed through ritual means.

Such a definition excludes other invisible entities such as *chötgör* (evil soul), *süns* (soul), *berd* (hungry ghost), *shulmus* (ghost) and *almas* (witch), who are all seen to have human origins. Although these invisible beings are also considered important to everyday life, their interference in human life is commonly described as infrequent, unpredictable and malevolent. I will discuss some of these invisible beings in the following chapter in the context of their feared appearance during intense drinking situations. However, since human interactions with spirits are circumscribed by much more elaborate prescriptions and encompassing ideas, it is with regards to these spiritual beings that practices such as mining are usually discussed locally. Moreover, as spirits are seen to *reside* in and even *own* particular parts of the landscape<sup>5</sup>, it is hardly surprising that activities such as penetrating the surface of the land, unearthing the subsoil and panning in streams are seen to upset spirits rather than roaming ghosts and evil souls. The autonomy that I have argued ninjas seek is thus not only in relation to certain living people, but indeed also certain spirits. Whilst previous chapters have discussed how ninjas establish independence from extended patriarchal kin groups, this chapter explores the ways in which such sociality is positioned within local cosmology.

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<sup>3</sup> These terms refer to the classification of administrative units of government. *Bag* corresponds to county, *sum* to district and *aimag* to region. In correlating the secular ranking of power to spiritual entities, there is a striking parallel to the Andean ethnography by Sallnow (1989), discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Delaplace (2008) made a similar point when proposing a phenomenological approach to the study of human-spirit relations in the Mongolian cultural region. He argued that whilst an ontological definition of spirits tends to emphasise post-rationalised static and categorical essences, an understanding of human-spirit relations requires greater attention to the different ways in which people perceive and relate to the multiple 'invisible things'.

## **Spirits and Buddhist deities in historical perspective**

In this section I will provide a brief historical outline of the numerous religious orders and practices that are relevant to an understanding of contemporary cosmology in Uyanga. Instead of presenting a linear transgression from one unified cosmology to the next, I will show how religious practitioners and their theologies have historically shared and built significantly from each other. As is evidenced in historical manuscripts, the common picture of opposing and discrete religions remains largely a political project of rulers rather than a testament to the actual practices of religious specialists and worshippers more generally. By appreciating the historical processes of syncretism in the Mongolian cultural region, I hope to convey how the current spiritual landscape of Uyanga is in a process of reinvention that extends far beyond today's mining activities.

Living within a vast and imposing landscape of barren mountains, wide valleys, lone trees, few rivers and a clear blue sky, it is not surprising that the Mongols lend particular significance to their physical environment. Numerous rituals are carried out to worship the benevolent forces of the landscape and to propitiate those that are considered harmful. Whilst some rituals are carried out by religious specialists such as Buddhist lamas, shamanic practitioners and lay elders, other rituals are incorporated into daily life and performed by household members. Among the diverse specialists, shamans seem to have become emblems of North Asian religion and are central to not only the popular imagination but also the scholarly literature (Eliade 1964, Hamayon 1990, Humphrey and Onon 1996). Shamanism, conceived as a shifting constellation of experiences rather than a authoritative and discrete religion, is today a dominant religious practice among certain Buryat groups, North Mongolian ethnic groups and several Inner Mongolian groups (Atwood 2004:494). Although Central Mongolia has never been considered a prominent place for shamanic traditions, I will briefly consider the important role of shamans in Mongolian history.

From 1206 to 1260 Chinggis Khan and his sons and grandsons established the Mongol Empire, the largest land empire in world history. At its greatest extent as a unified empire in 1259, it stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Allsen 1983:243). Covering such a huge land mass, it is not surprising that many different religions were brought into intense political contact. Claimed to be the “first foreign religion introduced among the Mongols” (Jagchid

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<sup>5</sup> By claiming that spirits are seen to ‘own’ particular parts of the landscape, I intend to convey the meaning of ‘being a master of’ the land.

and Hyer 1979:188), Nestorian Christianity, whose believers were excommunicated and driven from the Byzantine Empire, had a substantial following prior to and during the Mongol Empire<sup>6</sup>. Other religions such as various orders of Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism were also active among the Mongol khans. Indeed, “the Mongol policy of religious tolerance was based on the view that all worthy religions were, in fact, praying to the same god, the great eternal god the Mongols called *Tenggeri*<sup>7</sup>”. Atwood further notes that, “In return for their prayers to God for the Mongol rulers, the rulers would grant the clergy equal status and exemption from military services and taxes” (Atwood 2004:368).

In addition to such varied clergy, the khans also had at their courts large groups of female and male shamans. As *Tenger* had “granted world rule to Chinggis and his successors” (ibid.:368), the ability of shamans to communicate with *Tenger* and ancestral spirits (*onggod*) could support or undermine the political authority of rulers. In her historical account of the rise, consolidation and fall of North Asian states, Humphrey (1994) shows how the success of rulers depended on their ability to balance spiritual and human interactions. In return for observing taboos, carrying out rituals and coordinating human action with spiritual intervention, the supernatural forces endowed the polities with fertility, prosperity and military success (ibid.:196). The mandate of *Tenger* was thus of necessity to the rulers. In claiming privileged contact with the supernatural, shamans were often consulted by and cooperated with rulers. However, oscillating between rivalry and cooperation, rulers at times refused to acknowledge the proclamations of shamans<sup>8</sup>, and it is probably no coincidence that post-Chinggis rulers increasingly turned towards Tibetan Buddhism, where such rival claims with regards to *Tenger* were absent.

Ever since the reign of Khubilai Khan (1260 – 1294AD), Tibetan Buddhist monks had a regular presence as spiritual advisors in the Mongolian courts. According to Heissig (1980:ch. 3), it was not a deep interest in the religious doctrine that made Khubilai Khan (the Mongol emperor in present-day China) invite representatives of the reigning Tibetan Buddhist order to his court. Instead, the first conversion of the Mongols to Tibetan Buddhism rested on

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<sup>6</sup> See the description by William of Rubruck during his travels between 1253-56 of Nestorian monks active among the Mongols in the imperial palace of Karakorum (Dawson 1980a:137-139).

<sup>7</sup> The variation in the spelling of *Tenger* arises from Atwood’s transliteration from the Mongolian classical script rather than the Cyrillic script, which is today the official script of Mongolia.

<sup>8</sup> An example of such a clash occurred in the 13<sup>th</sup> century between the Mongol ruler Chinggis Khan and the shaman Teb Tengri where the latter was put to death after announcing Chinggis’s future defeat.



the necessity for political instruction and advice, on the influence of Tibetan medicine as practiced by Tibetan monks, which proved more convincing to the Mongols than the shamans' prayers for health, and on the greater magical effectiveness of Tantric magic (Heissig 1980:24).

Whilst later historiography accused the ruling class of misunderstanding the Tantric doctrine, causing its degeneration and eventual collapse, Buddhist practitioners remained alongside local shamans within the vicinity of the Mongolian courts and the laity.

The form Buddhism took in Tibet and Mongolia is often referred to as Lamaism due to the important role of the spiritual teacher whose word is seen as superior to the religious texts (Guenther 1989:180). Through meditation, yogic practices and participation in rituals, a disciple can begin to strive towards spiritual enlightenment and salvation from the phenomenal world (*samsara*) under the guidance of a lama. However, the lama who "has attained 'the Absolute', Emptiness, does not remain in that condition, but returns to the conventional world to help others" (Stein 1972:169). Such human assistance involves magical and ritual practices using the supernatural powers that lamas are seen to acquire in the process of spiritual devotion. Lamas were thus able to address concerns among the laity over which local shamans had previously enjoyed a monopoly.

Such spiritual insights and capabilities were not foreign to Lamaism. Indeed, its history reveals much interaction with varied forms of worship. According to Tibetan sources, there was a kingdom in Western Tibet called *Shangshung* where elaborate rituals were carried out by religious practitioners known as *bon po*. The rituals carried out by these priests included animal sacrifices, food offerings and lengthy mantras addressing the forces of the landscape. Elaborate origin myths describe how human beings entered the world after the gods and spirits, thus presenting a distant kinship tie between humans and the divine. In showing how humans must be respectful towards their divine kinsmen, myths rationalise the existence of taboos (especially with regards to the land) and the need for human adaptation and subservience to the spiritual presence. The task of the priests therefore consisted of "mediating between the unseen powers and the affected person in such a way as to restore the original balance" (Baumer 2002:29)<sup>9</sup>.

Although rulers had attempted to introduce Buddhism in Tibet since the early eighth century (Bansal 1994:49), it was not until the eleventh century that Buddhism gained a political stronghold. Monasteries were built, new orders founded and doctrines written. A renowned Buddhist lama from

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<sup>9</sup> Such spiritual mediation interacted with both the land of the living and of the dead (Kvaerne 1995:9).

India was invited to Tibet to “purify the cult of esoteric texts of tantras, to restore the ethical principles pertaining to the life of monks, and to systematise the elements of the calendar for Tibetans” (Kelényi 2003:12). It was at this time that the doctrine of a systematised Bon religion was written (Hoffmann 1961:97) and the first major Bon monastery founded (1072 AD, Yeru Wensakha).

Whilst rulers disguised their greed for political power in religious disputes, leading to an apparent dichotomy between Bon and Tibetan Buddhism, their practitioners began an intensive engagement with each others’ teachings. The two religions not only followed often identical rituals with regards to exorcist practices, but also adopted similar doctrines concerning salvation and enlightenment (Hoffmann 1961:106). Responding to concerns among the laity, Buddhist lamas began to carry out regular sacrifices to dangerous forces of the landscape, whilst *bon po* priests strove to regain their political position by adopting parts of the pro-Indian Buddhist ideas and practices. Today, Buddhist doctrine, symbolism and practices pervade Bon and vice versa; indeed “most of its pantheon is shared by the two religions” (Bansal 1994:170).

Some historical encounters between Mongolian shamanic traditions and Tibetan Buddhism (which had already incorporated and adapted to the religious practices of *bon po* priests) was antagonistic and violent<sup>10</sup>. According to Heissig, “reports of the prohibition and suppression of shamanism by the Lamaist missionaries run like a red thread through the second conversion of the Mongols from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards” (1980:36). As shamans were punished for carrying out blood sacrifices and possessing *onggod* figures, they began to “camouflage [their practices] with Lamaist emblems and formulae” (ibid.:44). However, Tibetan Buddhism was also strongly influenced by the popular religious practices that shamans continued to carry out. In his study of two eighteenth century manuscripts authored by a Buddhist lama on the correct manner of worship at *ovoos* (stone cairns), Bawden argues that

the intention of Mergen Diyanchi Lama [the author of the manuscripts] was perhaps not so much (..) to suppress shamanistic elements of worship by incorporating them, suitably altered, into Buddhist ritual, as to strengthen the position of Buddhism in Mongolia by associating indigenous cult-elements with similar phenomena already established in Tibetan Lamaism (1994b:18).

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<sup>10</sup> Conflicts arose in particular during the reign of Altan Khan (1508 – 1582AD) when missionaries of the *Dge-lugs-pa* (or ‘Yellow Hat’) order tried to eradicate shamanism in Mongolia by, among other tactics, burning *onggod* effigies.

In constituting a ritual manual, the manuscripts illustrate clearly the approximation of Tibetan Buddhism and shamanic practices into a useable syncretic product. Mountain worship may date as far back as the Neolithic period (Evans and Humphrey 2003:209) and constitutes one of the ritual practices commonly considered most archetypal of Mongolian spirit worship. However, the author of the manuscripts presents a rather different interpretation of *ovoo* worship, envisioning the stone cairns adorned with prayer-flags, *mani*-wheels and lotus images. Similarly, the praise of the *ovoo* as prescribed by the author is concerned not only with masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*) (Bawden 1994b:7) but also with Buddhist deities such as the water gods (*lus*) (ibid.:4). *Ovoo* worship traditionally involved animal sacrifice and blood offerings, but the author condemns such practices as “savage, impure and sinful” (ibid.:10), underlining instead the importance of worshippers’ devotion “to the white virtues” (ibid.:17). Although it is difficult to infer from written texts the extent to which worshippers actually followed the author’s recommendations for ritual action, these manuscripts convey the detailed level at which religious specialists attempted to syncretise their theologies.

In providing this brief outline I hope to have shown the close historical interconnections between various religious practices in the Mongolian cultural region. By highlighting only a fragment of the numerous and diverse cults and orders, I have focussed on those religious traditions that appear most relevant to current cosmologies in Uyanga. Although shamans and their particular spiritual complex (such as the notion of *onggod*) are absent in the region where I carried out my fieldwork, the more general ideas concerning the powers and presence of spirits with whom certain humans can communicate are highly present. Also, whilst *bon po* practitioners may seem geographically and historically marginal to today’s religious practices, their theology seems pronounced in current concerns in Uyanga about, for example, land taboos and the *lus*<sup>11</sup>. By approaching religious practices from a historical perspective, I believe that we are better able to distinguish and analyse religious creativity. The rest of this chapter will thus be concerned with a particular example of how people respond and adapt to new economies and their changing labour regimes through local religious practices. Whilst beliefs in spirits may at first appear abstract, unchanging and entirely otherworldly, I will show how, on the contrary, matters of daily life are incorporated into and made sense of through such beliefs.

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<sup>11</sup> I recognise that Mongolian ideas about ‘masters of the land’ (*gazryn ezed*) are also evident in such concerns. However, instead of ranking theologies in terms of their importance for local cosmology, my intention is rather to show the multiple and overlapping sources of religious reflexivity and creativity.

## The suppression of autonomy

In this section I will analyse how beliefs in spirits in the herding areas underline the importance of suppressing individual autonomy out of respect for the presence of other ‘existences’. I attempt to make sense of such beliefs by focusing on herders’ informal interactions with, experiences of and comments about spirits. In approaching cosmologies as personally held views and practices, I distance myself from a view of cosmology as an overarching system of beliefs which represents fundamental regional characteristics (Viveiros de Castro 1992). Such an approach risks not only representing cosmology as divorced from the particular concerns and interests of its holders, but also privileging the creativity of the scholar rather than that of our informants. By considering the ways in which people relate to taboos prohibiting certain interactions with the land, I will show that the spiritual landscape of the steppe reinforces a recognition of human life as fundamentally dependent on other ‘existences’. Rendering individual autonomy inimical to the recognition of spiritual beings, the spiritual landscape of the steppe enables the scapegoating of ninjas for calamities occurring to herders.

As people go about their daily lives, there are numerous taboos prohibiting specific forms of human interaction with the landscape. I was informed about such taboos whenever I unknowingly or forgetfully failed to observe them. At such times herders were quick to point out my mistakes and the impending danger I had caused. Herders reminded me most often of the following taboos:

- You must not dig into the ground (*gazart uhaj bolohgüi*)
- You must not break off fresh branches from trees (*noiton mod avch bolohgüi*)
- You must not put anything dirty in rivers, streams or lakes (*usand bohir yum orch bolohgüi*)
- You must not break stones (*urgaa chuluug hovhloj bolohgüi*)
- You must not break off the small twigs of berry bushes (*jimsnii ish avch bolohgüi*)
- You must not collect wild garlic (*zerleg songino avch bolohgüi*)
- Women must not climb up in pine trees (*emegtei hün hushand avirch bolohgüi*)

At times when I felt frustrated by the seemingly endless list of prohibitions on my interaction with the landscape, I asked people for explanations of why certain behaviour was seen as transgressive. Whilst they most often just sighed and provided no further explanation, I occasionally received short statements such as this:

“Trees are alive (*mod amtai*). You should therefore always collect only the dead wood on the ground. If you break off a fresh branch, even by accident, you hurt the tree. It doesn't like that, so it will get upset at you. Maybe it is not that particular tree (*yag ter mod*) that will get upset at you but the *hangain lus* [the mountain *lus*] protecting the forest (*mod n hamgaldag*). If the *lus* gets upset (*uurlaval*), it is very bad for you and your *ail*...”

(Field notes)

Recognising the physical environment as having life, feelings and agency, these taboos instruct people to avoid activities that deny the presence of other ‘existences’ in their own right. Water spirits become upset and masters of the land cause illnesses and other adversities if taboos are not adhered to. Agency and intention are thus not considered a human monopoly, but rather a shared feature of the interrelated forces that collectively constitute *baigal*. The term *baigal* refers to the existence of ‘nature’, commonly translated as ‘environment’, and derives from the verb *baih* (to be). This verb form is used to describe characteristics of humans, animals as well as material objects, and it conveys the multiplicity and diversity of the ‘existences’ that make up the all-encompassing ‘system’ of *baigal* (Jensen 2002). As long as each ‘existence’ suppresses its disturbing autonomy in the system of interrelated parts, a balance between powers is achieved and, for people, living becomes ‘wonderful’ (*saihan*) and ‘peaceful’ (*taivan*). Statements such as “we and our pastures are one body” (Yenhu 1996:20) therefore emphasise a practical dependency between herders and their physical environment, as well as their spiritual interconnection. The ignorance of others, as asserted by ninja miners, is thus inimical and even antithetical to life on the steppe: “If one part of nature denies the existence of another then eventually it will be denying its own” (Tseren 1996:147).

When people fail to observe taboos, they often conceive of later unfortunate events as manifestations of the spirits’ anger. For example, I was told that a woman once climbed up in a tree to pick nuts and shortly after the branch broke off. The woman hit the ground hard and broke her hand. “The branch broke and she got injured because she ignored the *savdag*”, people explained. Also, one of my host sisters once went to collect firewood, but instead of taking the dry branches from the ground, she broke off fresh branches. Upon mounting her usually calm horse, it suddenly jumped high up and threw her off. She injured herself badly and today ascribes this to her mistake of breaking off fresh branches. Numerous descriptions such as these circulate as household members often narrate these stories among themselves in informal situations of leisure. I suggest that such narratives not only provide compelling entertainment, but also serve to remind the *ail* of the importance of interacting morally with the landscape, that is, outlining how one ought to act.

As spirits are described as ‘moody’ and ‘temperamental’ (*aashtai*), it is impossible to predict the form their anger will take or its precise timing. Since the original transgression and the subsequent repercussions may be separated by weeks, many days may pass where people contemplate whether a particular unfortunate occurrence really was due to angered spirits, or if further misfortune is still to come. Spirits are thus often conveyed in daily discourse as anticipated causal agents that will eventually manifest themselves in human misfortune. However, spirits are not only referred to in post-rationalisations of misfortune but indeed also as ‘existences’ that are present in the landscape independently of human action. Transgressions of taboos are not necessary for people to start talking about spirits, as the following example illustrates. It was narrated by my host mother and concerns the common genre of ‘spiritual warnings’ (*sanuulga*).

“One evening we had the door of the *ger* open and suddenly three completely white things (*tsav tsagaan yum*) appeared. They never entered the *ger*, but instead remained outside. We didn’t know what they were. They weren’t stones or birds or anything we had ever seen before. We all got really scared (*aisan*) and just waited for them to go away. As soon as they had left, we read mantras (*unshlaga*). I think it was definitely the *lus* warning us”.

(Field notes)

At first when people narrated such ‘spiritual warnings’, I reacted by asking if someone had done something wrong, such as failing to observe particular taboos. In these situations I received puzzled looks and the simple reply “no”. I later realised that these narratives were centrally concerned with spirits rather than with humans. Whilst I had intuitively focussed on human actions necessitating these warnings, other listeners requested more detail about the spirits. With regards to the ‘completely white things’, others asked “were they big?”, “how white were they?”, “did they stay for long?”. In talking about spirits, I suggest that people often attempt to turn the invisible into a concrete and tangible ‘existence’<sup>12</sup>. The warnings are in this sense not about particular human acts, but are rather concerned with the incontestable power of spirits.

Faced with such invisible forces, herders generally strive to respect the numerous spiritual beings. By consulting the lunar calendar, local Buddhist lamas and divinatory coins, herders seek advice regarding which days may prove benign to carry out disruptive actions. Events such as moving an *ail* to new pasture, building animal sheds and preparing new tethering lines for baby yaks and mares are commonly preceded by divinatory enquiries that seek spiritual sanction. If permission has not

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<sup>12</sup> In rare cases I heard of people who could see spiritual beings. Interestingly, all such people had a reputation for transgressing taboos and carry out ‘bad karma acts’.

been granted (*ödör garig tseerleh*), herders are likely to either try another divinatory technique or delay the desired action. However, such observance is far from shared by everybody living in the area, as one of my host brothers explained:

“We can see in our calendar when we can carry out certain acts that are usually bad (*muu*), such as forcing things into the ground, for example the *zel* (the wooden pole that holds the tethering line for the baby yaks and the mares). If we don’t pay attention to this, the masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*) will become angry (*uurlana*). For example, ninjas dig many holes but they don’t care about the masters of the land”. This statement left his wife speechless and visibly taken aback in disagreement. He continued, “they don’t look at the calendar every day, they don’t stop working when it’s an inauspicious day for digging. So, if ninjas come by here, having earlier ignored the taboos and upset the masters of the land, and we serve them vodka or the like (*arhi marhi*), the masters of the land may get upset at us instead of at them. That’s because the ninjas are bringing their bad acts to our *ger*, even if we don’t know what they’ve been doing before coming here. Also, wood thieves (*modny hulgaich*) may first go to the forest, cut down fresh trees and then on their way back stop at somebody’s *ger*. The masters of the land may then get upset not at the actual wood thieves but at the *ail* where they stopped”.

(Field notes)

Given the proximity to large-scale ninja mining, where people transgress fundamental taboos related to the land on a daily basis, herders constantly fear for calamities instigated by such behaviour. In the excerpt above, my host brother describes how angry spirits can come to his *ger* regardless of his own involvement in transgressive acts. Merely by letting someone into his *ger* and hosting them, he becomes an accomplice in the watchful eyes of the spirits. In the following chapter I discuss drinking situations as celebrations of amicable living where deferential hosts and demanding guests interact within a heightened formal hierarchy. In the above excerpt it transpires that by allowing a person to become a guest, the host must serve generously as well as accept the pollution (*buzar*<sup>13</sup>) and spiritual anger the guest might have generated. Accommodating the demands of guests, the host thus similarly becomes a victim of spirits’ anger. However, whilst herders are quick to blame ninjas for their own personal misfortunes, they also willingly entertain the possibility that the transgressor may be a local herder. Cases of misfortune therefore generally give rise to much informal speculation, yet such scenarios only rarely lead to actual direct accusation. The difficulty in identifying a single perpetrator is not only due to the ‘transferability’

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss the concept of *buzar* extensively in the previous chapter in the context of money-making from mining and other activities. Given the perceived dangers involved in inviting *buzar* and spiritual anger into a household, I will in chapter 6 consider why people willingly allow ninjas and others to become their guests.

of spiritual anger as described above, but also the infinite number of possible perpetrators. A local saying encapsulates this:

*Yos medehgüi hünd yor haldahgüi*

This saying can be translated as ‘a person who does not know the traditions will not be punished by the warnings’. Although the saying might suggest that people ignorant of taboos do not upset spirits, herders explained to me that only those unaware of the traditions would not be punished by the spirits. It is not only people who are aware of local taboos that upset spirits, but indeed any person passing through the area. As people knowingly or unknowingly upset local spirits, it becomes impossible for victims of their anger to identify its likely source. Angry spirits abound, as do possible transgressors of taboos. As such, the proverb can be seen to both expand the number of possible transgressors and facilitate the common practice among herders of blaming ninjas for personal misfortunes by casting them as those who ‘do not know the traditions’.

### **Spirits and *ails***

In this section I will analyse ideas surrounding the ‘blessings’ or ‘fortunes’ (*hishig*<sup>14</sup>) that spirits are seen to bestow on those people who show them appropriate respect. According to Empson (2007), *hishig* “refers to the concept of a life-force or animating essence that can be understood through actions that involve attending to a part or portion that fuels a whole” (ibid.:114-115). Although the upset spirits of the landscape may appear oppressive and fearful, they are indeed also seen as highly generous and cooperative. I will consider how beliefs in *hishig* emphasise the importance of respectful interaction with spiritual beings as well as within the household group. As the protection of *hishig* within the *ail* rests largely on the daughter-in-law, I will show how ideas about *hishig* emphasise particularly the peaceful incorporation of affines into herding kin groups.

When talking about the different rewards spirits give to people for their observance of taboos, herders use the word *hishig*. At times the speaker may denote a particular part of the landscape as offering the *hishig*, such as *delhiin hangain hishig*. However, most often it is simply referred to as a generalised entity with no identified attachment to specific features of the landscape. My host sister described *hishig* in this way:

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<sup>14</sup> According to Bawden (1997: 441), *hishig* carries meanings such as ‘well-being’, ‘good fortune’ and ‘favour’.



“There is *hishig* everywhere. In the forest, for example, our *hishig* is collectable wood, bushes full of delicious berries and pine trees with plenty of nuts. On the steppe (*belcheer*) it is big fat marmots, green and tall grass, whilst in the river it is plenty of clean water. In this way, the love of the *lus* is all the good things that make our lives possible as opposed to all the negative repercussions when we don’t show due respect to the *lus*. At such times, the *hishig* is arguing (*hishig heleldej baina*) and we will not be able to find any berries or the like (*jims mims*)”.

(Field notes)

Among herders, *hishig* thus encompasses all the aspects of the physical environment that generate the basis for their pastoral livelihood. Without clean water or green grass a herding household cannot sustain its herd nor its own members. The seriousness with which herders approach taboos related to the land, as described in the previous section, emphasises this need for the spirits’ generosity. Herders often express immense gratitude and respect for the spirits’ approval of the ways in which they go about their lives. “If the White Old Man<sup>15</sup> (*Tsagaan Övgön*) wasn’t happy with how we live our lives, he wouldn’t give us so many baby animals. He is obviously very pleased!”, my host father exclaimed gleefully after a successful calving season. In showing constant respect for local spirits, herding households are thus fed in return by their generosity.

The term *hishig* is also used among local hunters (*anchin*) when describing the game they kill. However, certain animals such as young deer (*buga*) should never be killed and if a hunter still manages to kill it, people do not refer to it as bringing *hishig*. A hunter explained to me that if a young deer is killed, the hunter has tricked and stolen it from the *hangain lus* (the mountain *lus*). Such theft is dangerous because not only will the spirit become very upset and increasingly hesitant to part with its animals, but it will also withhold the household’s future wealth, ensuring that household members for generations to come will not become rich. Given the idea of *baigal*, with its interrelated ‘existences’, people cannot autonomously insist on receiving the spirits’ *hishig*. If they try, their punishment is severe, as the following excerpt from my field notes shows:

Earlier in the day a middle-aged man, already drunk, came to our *ger*. I only made an appearance and instead sat chatting with mum outside until the visitor eventually left. The man

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<sup>15</sup> According to Haslund, “the steppe cattle (..) were owned by the White Old Man of the Steppe, who generously allowed the Mongols to administer and exploit his wealth. But the White Old Man of the Steppe was weak in the face of many temptations. He often gambled with the Dragon Prince [presumably the *lus*], the ruler of all human sicknesses and lord of life and death, and as the two mighty beings had to pay in their currencies, the poor Mongols always had to suffer for it” (1949:143). Whilst I have not heard such descriptions of the White Old Man in Uyanga, many local herders often place offerings to the White Old Man figurine on their altar and/or pay Buddhist lamas to carry out appropriate readings. Although there are no canonical texts about the White Old Man (Heissig 1980:78) in Tibetan Buddhism, he is a central figure in the Buddhist *tsam* masked dances.

was not only a heavy-drinking herder who was seasonally involved in ninja mining, but also a hunter (*anchin*) who killed wolves, marmots and even deer. “He killed *hangain delhiin hairtai yum* (the love of the world forest). This is very bad. He killed deer (*buga*), squirrel (*herem*), marmot (*torog*), white hare (*chandaga*), snow cock (*hoilog shuvuu*) and great bustard (*todog shuvuu*). *Hangain delhiin hairtai yum* also includes trees, such as pinetrees (*hush*), and he once cut down a pine tree – the whole tree! He thus did *üiliin ürgüi yum* (bad karma actions) and we say that this affects not only the person himself but several generations after him, at least three. So if someone does ‘bad karma actions’, later generations will have a poorer life. One of his younger siblings is retarded and everybody knows why that is. People here talk about how he once cornered a group of wild deer and as he shot each of them, even a little calf, a flood of blood (*tsusny gol*) ran down the mountain. Horrible! Because of all these ‘bad karma actions’ he is today *bayajihgüi hün* (someone who cannot become rich). At one point he had many animals, but now most of them have died. This is not just him being a bad herder but one who has upset and shown no respect for the *lus*. It doesn’t matter what he tries to do. For him there is no *hishig* (*tüünd hishig baihgüi*). He does some ninja mining to make money, and some hunting and herding, but he will never become rich. We say: ‘Having killed three deer the impoverished man will remain forever destitute’<sup>16</sup>. The deer is such a beautiful animal. One should never kill it”.

(Field notes)

Having repeatedly ignored taboos and even killed the most cherished kind of animal<sup>17</sup>, the hunter in the above example is withdrawn from the social pursuits of prosperity-making and reduced to an embodied punishment of his own wrong-doings. Whilst old manuscripts often refer to the Sky (*Tenger*) as deciding the destiny of people (Humphrey and Onon 1996:197), the above excerpt did not convey such a causal entity. If I had specifically asked about *Tenger*, such a causality might have been described. However, in Uyanga people did not generally mention the Sky in such contexts. People were much less interested in defining causal relationships than I was during fieldwork, and causal agents often remained obscure. The hunter and his family are thus verbally, spiritually and practically suffering the punishment inflicted by a non-identified, generalised ‘existence’, reigning above and beyond human life. As the hunter continues his pre-destined existence, he becomes a human warning about the dangers of not taking spirits seriously and the importance of acting respectfully to attract their blessings.

<sup>16</sup> *Gurvan buga alaad bayajaagüi hün hezee ch bayajihgüi.*

<sup>17</sup> Mongolian Buddhist lamas also have a high regard for deer. They describe deer as the most intelligent and beautiful animal of the forest, and carvings of deer adorn key Buddhist symbols in Mongolia. It is thus common to see small figurines of deer on household altars in the city as well as in the countryside. With regards to Mongolian folk religious practices, Haslund also mentions the incarnation of the nether world ruler *Erlig Khan* as a blue stag (1949:168).

In addition to appearing in the regional literature on hunting, *hishig* is also discussed in the context of Mongolian kinship studies. Empson (2003) describes how *hishig* is considered an entity of the *ail* which the daughter-in-law, in particular, is responsible for protecting (ibid.:135). Within the household group, *hishig* is evidenced in the health of the household members, their animals as well as general luck and fortune. However, in the case of almost any adversity affecting the *ail*, it is the daughter-in-law who may be blamed for not protecting *hishig* well enough. Although it is impossible to confine *hishig*, it is generally regarded as an entity that may diminish if household members are not careful in their interactions with outsiders (Chabros 1992:155). In order to protect *hishig*, male household members cut hair from animals' tails before they are sold and then tie the hair to the rope of the smoke hole (*toono*) of the *ger*<sup>18</sup>. Also, before a sheep is slaughtered, men rub its nose and then rub their hands off in their robe (*deel*). For women, the top layer of fresh milk, *airag* (fermented mare's milk) and new tea must be kept within the household group and never given to outsiders. These practices of protecting *hishig* underscore the importance of withholding the most potent part of the household's products and keeping it among the members of the *ail*. Just as the first bottle of home-brewed yak vodka is the strongest, so is the top layer of milk (*deej*) the fattest. The *deej* is seen to carry the strength of the *ail*, both literally and spiritually, and if given away the household group will eventually wither. Similarly, the hairs of animals displayed on the central rope of the *ger* enable people to marvel at the pastoral success of the household group whose *deels* have become thick with animal grime from the many animals that have been born, herded and eventually slaughtered. Such daily testaments to the achievements and endurance of the *ail* in the face of constant negotiations with the spiritual landscape accentuate the importance of the *ail* as the primary social and spiritual unit.

Numerous other practices that are seen to protect *hishig* also exist and tend to vary slightly between *ails*. However, regardless of the composition of both the herd and the household group, household heads and their wives often complain about their daughters-in-law not protecting *hishig* well enough. In a local *ail* an intense argument erupted one day when the daughter-in-law, supposedly 'by accident', gave her mother (who is not considered kin and lives in a different *ail*) fresh milk without first taking off the top layer of her milk (*deej*)<sup>19</sup>. The daughter-in-law has a relatively small herd of milking yaks that she milks every day. The milk from her yaks sustains her husband, her children and herself, and they decide how much milk to sell and to prepare for their own

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<sup>18</sup> Humphrey and Onon (1996:260, footnote 110) mention a similar practice among the Daur.

<sup>19</sup> The daughter-in-law's mother lived nearby and was suffering financial hardship. However, the daughter-in-law had before asserted her autonomy from her husband's kin group by moving away from the *ail* with their children. The daughter-in-law's failure to protect the *hishig* was thus seen as yet another example of her unwillingness to be incorporated into the husband's kin group.

consumption. Living in their own *ger*, they thus have their own milking economy divorced from the rest of the *ail*. However, despite the separate production and consumption of the milk from her yaks, members of the household group consider the use of the milk spiritually related to the *ail* as a collectivity<sup>20</sup>. Her father-in-law therefore shouted furiously at her, whilst her mother-in-law pulled her aside and warned her against continuing such disloyal acts. The daughter-in-law and her husband apologised incessantly, but still to this day her parents-in-law are not convinced that she will do her outmost to protect the *hishig*.

Concerns about *hishig* thus highlight the *ail*, rather than individual *gers*, as the primary spiritual unit<sup>21</sup>. Given the central position of the daughter-in-law in protecting the *hishig*, ideas about spiritual blessing among household members support attempts to incorporate affines into the kin hierarchy of the household. Although affines can never become agnatic kinsmen, they are expected to act as such. By acting according to the interests of kinsmen, the daughter-in-law protects *hishig* as well as the future descendants of the *ail*. Kin ideology is in this way supported by ideas about spirits, emphasising the *ail* and its necessary attachment of affines as a cooperating and harmonious unit. However, by occupying such a central position with regards to the spiritual reproduction of the *ail*, the daughter-in-law is also capable of wielding a fundamental influence over the future of the *ail* if she so wishes. A rebellious daughter-in-law can thus carelessly distribute or neglect *hishig*, affecting the *ail* much more severely than by withholding descendants<sup>22</sup>.

## Fear of wolves

The importance of respecting the presence of other ‘existences’ and observing local taboos is expressed not only through ideas about *hishig*, but indeed also through its antithesis: the wolf. By analysing the position of wolves (*chono*) within local cosmologies, I will suggest that this feared predator on the steppe provides a compelling non-human framework for understanding and condemning individual autonomy. After the daughter-in-law described above was seen as

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<sup>20</sup> Whilst the husband’s family was unsure about whether the daughter-in-law’s *deej* would benefit her mother, they were certain that such prohibited giving diminished the *hishig* of their *ail*.

<sup>21</sup> Chabros makes this point forcefully in her study of ritual practices among different Mongol groups, based on historical manuscripts from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as ethnographic fieldwork. She states that: “*Kesig* [*hishig*] represents the individual’s share (portion) of the vital energy of his lineage. The shift in meaning in the word has been from a concrete sense, in which a portion of a larger quantity of meat represents the relationship between a man and his clan, as part to whole, to an abstract sense in which the word refers to the energy which animates the clan and of which each individual member partakes” (Chabros 1992:155).

<sup>22</sup> Since practices of adoption are relatively common (Empson 2003:228-236), it is possible to acquire descendants independently of a daughter-in-law’s reproductive abilities. The feared potential of affinal autonomy is therefore seen to rest not so much in a daughter-in-law’s refusal to have children, as in her uncertain protection of *hishig*.

neglecting the interests of her household group, she was not only distrusted for her disloyal behaviour, but indeed also privately described as '*chono shig*'. In this section I will consider why wolves and their human approximations are so feared among herders.

In the mountainous region of Uyanga wolves are one of the biggest threats to the herd. Herders thus talk constantly about wolves, and stories concerning packs of wolves killing hundreds of animals abound. Wolves are said to bite to death as many animals as possible and only occasionally devour their prey. Yet wolves almost always inflict fatally deep wounds and the injured animal has a minimal chance of survival. Considerable precaution is therefore taken to prevent these feared attacks, and a male household member will usually stay up at night to watch over the animals. Often equipped with an old Russian riffle, the aim is to kill a wolf if sighted. Herders take part in an elaborate scheme encouraging the elimination of wolves in the area. If a hunter kills a wolf, each *ger* in the *bag* is expected to pay him 1000 tg., amounting to a maximum of about 200'000 tg. upon killing a wolf. Such a sum by far exceeds ordinary earnings on the steppe and local hunters often talk enthusiastically about the prospects of killing a wolf.

However, wolves are not only feared for their attacks on herds but also for their association with the *lus*<sup>23</sup>. The speed, slyness and aggression with which a wolf attacks its prey are seen as indicative of its position as 'the messenger of the *lus*' (*lusyn zarlaga*)<sup>24</sup>. The following excerpt illustrates the perceived relationship between the wolf as a spiritual being and a feared predator.

One day my younger one of my host brothers was herding sheep and he happened to pick some wild onion (*zerleg songino*). According to my host sister, less than ten minutes after picking the wild onion a pack of wolves attacked the herd and killed a sheep. Just before picking the wild onions, her brother couldn't see any wolves at all. "It was as if the wolves came out of the ground right when he picked the onion. 'Normal' wolves can't do that, so it was definitely because the '*lus* of the mountains' had got angry (*hangain lus uurlasan*). If the *lus* is upset, wolves will appear", she said. I asked why he had picked the onion if he knew that the *lus* would get upset. "He probably just felt like eating onion at that moment".

(Field notes)

The last comment made by my host sister highlights the difficulty with which cosmologies can be approached as logical objects of study. Connections, which seemed intuitive and necessary to me,

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<sup>23</sup> Whilst in other parts of Mongolia, the wolf is said to be the '*tengeriin nohoi*' (*Tenger's* dog or heavenly dog), my informants did not use this expression. When talking about the wolf, it was always in reference to the *lus*.

were often countered with puzzled looks and seemingly unrelated answers<sup>25</sup>. I mistakenly presumed the central position of humans in these narratives as well as the unfailing presence of an overarching logic informing all of human action. I eventually began to appreciate these narratives as accounts of powerful spirits rather than checklists for human action. As angry spirits are surrounded by much uncertainty, even adhering to such a finite guide would not grant people protection from the temperamental spirits.

The image of the powerful *lus* sending wolves from underground (*dooshoo*) hinges on particular ideas about wolves that transcend their mere predatory nature<sup>26</sup>. When herders talk about wolves, they invariably describe the many wicked characteristics of the animal in a slow dramatic voice. Whilst the word ‘*muu*’ (bad) seems a cherished description, it is also labelled a thief (*hulgaich*) who steals from others. Since the wolf does not always devour its prey, people often lament that it steals without even ‘needing’ the stolen animal. Herders condemn such ‘greedy’ theft as ‘purposeless’ (*utgagüi*) and entirely ‘selfish’ (*aminch*). By only taking from humans and never giving anything in return, the wolf is criticised for intruding in human life and destroying the wealth (*bayarlag*) humans have built up. As such, wolves are anti-social and epitomise dangerous autonomy and careless individuality<sup>27</sup>. Ideas about pollution (*buzar*) further consolidate descriptions of wolves as antithetical to human life and prosperity. By consuming the stolen goods, the wolf absorbs all the pollution (*buzar*) involved in such theft, which is in turn passed on to humans if they come into contact. It consequently becomes paramount for humans to avoid all exposure to the predator<sup>28</sup>. As a result, the wolf is feared for both its predatory hunger for the herders’ animals and its contempt for human life. As it embodies the very characteristics that prevent and even undermine the harmonious balance of forces within *baigal*, the wolf can thus be represented as the moral inversion of human sociality. Wolves are what humans ought not to be.

## Patriarchy and spirits

I have so far examined how local beliefs in spirits encourage the suppression of disrespectful, wolf-like autonomy, while placing particular emphasis on the *ail* as the focus for interaction with

<sup>24</sup> The wolf is also often described as ‘the horse of the *lus*’ (*lusyn unaa*) since “it has a mane like a horse”.

<sup>25</sup> See Humphrey and Onon (1996:89-90) for a similar observation.

<sup>26</sup> It is possible that beliefs about wolves in Uyanga are part of a more general association between wild animals and misfortune in the Mongolian cultural region. Urgunge, for example, says about foxes that “they are living devils” (Humphrey and Onon 1996:102).

<sup>27</sup> In chapter 4 I discuss how acts of generosity are essential to both personhood and social living.

<sup>28</sup> In the case of a killed wolf, however, herders are eager to get a part of the wolf, such as the front leg or the tongue. Whilst a wolf leg is seen to scare away future wolves, a wolf tongue is seen to have potent medical uses.

spiritual beings. By looking more closely at the relationship between gendered hierarchies within the household group and ritual practices, I will suggest that ideas about spirits support and reinforce patriarchal structures more generally. Since I have not been allowed to take part in the rituals described below nor been able to discuss the events extensively with my local hosts, I will in this section rely mostly on the regional literature.

Countless stone cairns (*ovoo*) adorn the hills and mountains of Uyanga. When passing *ovoos*, men and women of all ages usually collect three small stones from the surrounding ground, circumambulate the cairn clockwise three times, whilst throwing one stone at a time onto its conical body. The larger cairns have a wooden stick in the centre and are covered with items such as horse skulls, broken vodka bottles, money notes, burnt candles and prayer flags. As for the small *ovoos* in the vicinity of our *ail*, I was told by my host family that I could make offerings (*tahil*) of prepared dairy products, such as *aruul*, or cooked food, such as homemade cookies (*boov*) or fried bread (*bin*). My host sisters explained to me:

“Remember, it has to be homemade food (*geriin hool*) because otherwise the masters of the land (*gazryn ezed*) might get confused and not know where the offering came from. When you give offerings to the masters of the land, they will become happy (*bayasah*) and not forget the people who live on their land”.

Whilst pastoral work took my family and I past local *ovoos* daily, I never attended seasonal rituals (*ovoo tahilga*) at the main *ovoo* in the village or elsewhere. I was told that because I am a woman, my presence would potentially upset the spirits. According to Sneath (1991:150-159), such restricted access to attend *ovoo* rituals is not unusual and is grounded in particular ideas about animal sacrifice, men and land.

A local Buddhist lama with whom I stayed for a couple of weeks explained to me that *ovoo* rituals do not worship a single spirit but concern all the local spiritual entities of *Tenger*, *lus savdag*, *gazryn ezed*, *usan khan* and *Tsagaan Övgön*. Although the lama strongly disagreed with and disapproved of local beliefs in *gazryn ezed* and *usan khan*, claiming that such spirits did not exist and were mere superstition, he still included them in mantras when addressing the spirits. He explained: “What is important in *ovoo* rituals is to make offerings (*örgöl örgöh*) to all of them [the spirits] who are in that area. *Ovoo* rituals are about the area (*gazar*) rather than just the *shar lus*”. The offerings include sprinkling milk and tea, burning incense and candles, reciting mantras and adorning the *ovoo* with additional prayer flags and Buddhist images. Whilst the literature frequently

mentions practices of animal sacrifice in conjunction with *ovoo* rituals, my lama host and all others were unwilling to discuss such matters with me. According to Humphrey and Onon (1996), a senior patriarch supplies the sacrificial animal. Upon killing it, its blood is sprinkled onto the *ovoo* and its meat is divided into shares which are cooked over a fire. The sacrificed meat becomes a ‘receptacle’ for the spirits’ blessings (*hishig*) and is shared among men according to their genealogical seniority. The lama explained to me that since women are polluted (*buzartai*), their presence would upset the spirits, who would in turn withhold *hishig*. As the participating men contribute sacrificial animals, share in the consumption of the blessed meat while circumambulating the *ovoo* and building it up with more stones, the enduring solidity of agnatic groups is enacted and asserted in such rituals<sup>29</sup>. In conferring exclusive blessings onto ranked male participants as opposed to polluted women, the *ovoo* ritual forcefully reasserts social differences in kin and gender status.

This male celebration is further emphasised in the three ‘manly’ games (*eriin gурvan naadam*) of archery, horse racing and wrestling, which commonly follow *ovoo* rituals. In her study of these games, Kabzinska-Stawarz (1991:87) discusses the physical manliness of these sports, as well as the symbolic acts that indicate associations between land and male strength. Wrestlers claim to gain strength from touching the earth and rubbing their hands with dirt before and after a match. Also, “magical functions” (ibid.:88) are attributed to milk products rather than meat. Upon defeating an opponent, wrestlers therefore receive handfuls of dried milk curd or cheese. Rubbing it against their foreheads, eating a little and then throwing it towards the spectators, the *ovoo*, the mountains and the sky, the wrestlers ‘share the victory’ with the spectators and pass on their accumulated strength. The earth itself is thus considered potent and able to transfer strength, virility and vigour onto appropriate male-defined groups. Whilst men achieve strength from the earth, women, in contrast, (and by extension, female animals) are ‘too weak’ to take part in the games. Kabzinska-Stawarz notes, with regards to horse racing, that “mares represent the power of women and so they do not participate in *naadam*. Only good horses were respected” (ibid.:96). As men interact exclusively with the earth and its spirits through *ovoo* rituals and the ‘manly’ games, their central position of power is consolidated socially and legitimised ritually<sup>30</sup>. Without the spirits’ blessings, the grass

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<sup>29</sup> The central place of men within Mongolian cosmologies is also encapsulated in *Erlig Khan*, who is the ruler of the netherworld. The first part of his name (*Er-*) means ‘male’, and he acts with brutal power, strength and virility. However, in Uyanga people never mentioned *Erlig Khan* and I have therefore not discussed him further in this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> Humphrey and Onon (1996) argue that women also hold important positions of power due to their association with pollution. They describe how objects soiled with menstrual blood are ‘women’s swords’ that can fight off and protect against spiritual dangers. In Uyanga ideas surrounding pollution have not given rise to such discourses of female power or female-based power.



would cease to grow, the streams would run dry and even human fertility would be diminished<sup>31</sup>. Although women can place offerings at small *ovoos* and thereby aid the benevolence of local spirits, the reproduction of life thus largely depends on the ability of senior men to maintain benign relations with all spiritual beings<sup>32</sup>. Upon passing the numerous stone cairns dotting the landscape, passers-by are reminded of this solid presence of local agnatic groups, whether it is the patriarchal *ail*, the patriclan or the administrative unit.

Through my analysis of tabooed practices, spirits' blessings, fears of wolves and *ovoo* rituals, I hope to have shown how beliefs in spirits in the herding areas underline the importance of specific social relationships. Whilst local taboos related to the land prescribe that all individuals should suppress their disturbing actions in recognition of the spirits' omnipresence, only men can take part in the essential seasonal 'rituals of renewal' at *ovoos*. As men receive the spirits' blessings (*hishig*), their *ails* are able to enjoy fertility and prosperity. If they have loyal daughters-in-law, who align themselves most strongly with their husband's kin group, *ails* can protect the *hishig* and maintain the enduring stability of the patriclan, concretely manifested in the fire cult and stone cairns. In emphasising *ails* and male seniority as appropriate units for interaction with spirits, local beliefs and ritual action support and legitimise the social position of herding patriarchs. The endorsement of the hierarchical ranking of men into 'masters of the household' (*geriin ezed*) may be reflected in a similar hierarchical terminology surrounding spirits such as *gazryn ezed* (masters of the land) and *galny ezen* (master of fire). The word '*ezen*' is used to refer to human as well as spiritual relationships of governance attached to specified domains<sup>33</sup>. Since even *ezed* (masters) are obliged to respect each other, there is thus no prescribed autocratic dominance within this conceptualisation of interrelated 'existences'. As a result, if herders ignore spirits, as did the hunter who killed deer, they will remain forever destitute and sterile, and may one day become like the anti-social greedy predator of the wolf. Within this spiritual landscape it is the severing of social and cosmological ties that allows for the emergence of an autonomous individual, refusing to recognise all other 'existences'. Casting such autonomy as a punishable anti-thesis to social life, people who have once been labelled a 'wolf' are left with lasting fears for its realisation. According to many herders, such

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<sup>31</sup> Tseren (1996) describes how the Oirat Mongols perceive children as given by *Tenger*. In Uyanga I often heard similar comments, such as "if *Tenger* is upset a woman will remain childless".

<sup>32</sup> Humphrey and Onon (1996) mention 'rituals of renewal' carried out by women only. However, in Uyanga I never came across such women-exclusive rituals.

<sup>33</sup> Another such spirit is *usan khan* (king of the water) where *khan* is used both among humans and spirits denoting a hierarchical relationship. Recalling the earlier description of how rulers during the Mongol empire cooperated with shamans in communicating with *Tenger*, the term 'ruler' or 'king' (*khan*) does not imply an autocratic exercise of power.

immoral ‘wolf-like’ selfishness especially flourishes in the mining areas. The following section will consider how the transgressive behaviour of ninja miners is positioned within local cosmologies.

### ***Hishig and gold***

In the mining areas I often heard ninjas talking about *hishig*<sup>34</sup>. However, its meaning was noticeably different from its usual invocation by herders and local hunters. By analysing the relationship between spirits and gold, I will in this section show how Buddhist lamas take up a central position within the local gold mining economy. Without the involvement of lamas, the spiritual risks of gold mining may become too severe for the ninjas to overcome single-handedly.

The following excerpt from my field notes concerns the kinds of ‘blessings’ spirits are seen to bestow on ninjas living and working on their land.

It was early evening and I was chatting with our neighbours when a young woman stopped by for tea. She told me that her *ail* used to have many yaks but after the *zud* in 1999/2000 almost all of their animals died. They now have only one yak cow left. Needing something to live off, she and her husband have been mining for gold as ninjas since 2000. As soon as the weather becomes warmer around March they begin to pan for gold and work in the mines until October when the water freezes. “But we never find more than just enough to pay for our daily meals and the like. The *hishig* of our district doesn’t seem to be able to reach far enough” (*Sumyn hishig hürtej chadahgüi yum*). I asked her what she meant by ‘*hishig*’, and she elaborated: “Gold! We never find any gold. This area has no gold anymore. Also trees! People come and cut down all the trees so there’s no firewood left for us. And berries! People pick all the berries so we have nothing. We can’t eat berries in August like we used to. We can’t make berry-wine for the lunar new year anymore. There’s nothing left for us. And nuts! People come out here and fill so many bags with nuts that they take them away on jeeps and trucks. They then sell the nuts in the cities and make a lot of money, whilst we have nothing to eat. There is no longer any *hishig* to be found!”

(Field notes)

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<sup>34</sup> Recognising that the population in the mines is heterogeneous and highly transient, I do not presume that beliefs in spirits and ritual practices among ninjas amount to a single shared cosmology. The data I use in this chapter stems solely from former or part-time herders involved in mining as well as local Buddhist lamas. I do not include data from public sector workers who live in urban centres and only mine during their summer vacation. Since these miners only reluctantly talked to me about religious life, this exclusion is primarily due to the limited data I managed to collect on the topic.

In referring to gold as *hishig*, the visitor underscored that the precious mineral, just like berries and trees, are part of the physical environment, forming the basis of human livelihood. Since the land has its masters who decide how much *hishig* people will attract, finding gold is not simply a practical matter of digging deep holes and panning the unearthed gravel for gold flakes. The amount of gold ninjas will find is instead perceived as entirely dependent on the generosity of the spirits. Whilst knowledge of mining techniques and local geology may enhance the chances of hitting a gold vein, such insights alone are not seen as sufficient. Maintaining a good relationship with local spirits is thus paramount to the mining successes of ninjas. However, many ninjas recognise that local spirits do not approve of their disrespectful mining activities, and as a result the bestowed *hishig* is perceived as diminishing. Furthermore, as the ninja population increases each year, the pressure to get a share of the *hishig* grows correspondingly and many ninjas end up searching for gold in vain.

When ninjas repeatedly ignore taboos related to the land, spirits may not only withhold *hishig* but also wreak havoc by inflicting illnesses, instigating accidents and even causing death. Whenever a ninja suffers such misfortune, it is usually said that it was because of the anger of the *lus*. Given the constant presence of angry spirits in the mines, rumours circulate that at least one ninja dies every day. Whilst I fortunately did not come across any actual deaths, discourses of fatality and suffering seem to thrive in its immediate physical absence. I was therefore constantly warned when passing deep mining holes that a corpse might lie rotting at the bottom. Such corpses are considered particularly dangerous as they would have turned into ‘evil souls’ (*chötgör*), hungry for the human life in which it once partook (see chapter six). As people move through the barren pot-holed landscape of the mines, the visible destruction of the ground, coupled with the stories about fatal accidents, provides constant reminders of the spirits’ imminent anger.



**Figure 10: The mining landscape**

Living in such a seemingly doomed environment, ninjas often request that lamas carry out ritual offerings and recitations of mantras that serve to appease the spirits and cajole them into bestowing *hishig*<sup>35</sup>. During my stay with a local Buddhist lama, I observed that ninjas constituted the majority of the people who requested his help. Whilst ninjas had become his most frequent and loyal clients, his frustrations with their way of life seemed to be growing accordingly. Such frustrations seemed to be shared by most of the lamas in the monastery of Uyanga. The excerpt below captures well the view of ninja mining among many lamas.

For several hours ninjas kept coming to my host's house, requesting that he do personal readings (*unshlaga*). When the wave of clients finally seemed over, he leaned back on the chair and sighed: "Oh, so many of these ninjas have a wrong understanding of life and religion. They come here to ask for *hishig* or they ask me to go to the mining area. Maybe the ninjas are starting to find less gold or are falling ill. But they always seem to think that by giving offerings (*örgöl örgöh*) and by asking for *lus savdag*'s protection they will find more gold. This is wrong. They don't understand that it is their own greediness (*shunal*) that causes their misery (*zovlon*). Gold is very dangerous; they should leave it alone. They don't need it because it always leads to

problems. Gold is not like silver or other metals. Gold is heavy (*hünd*) and potent (*hüchtei*). People can't protect themselves against the power of gold (*altny chadvar*<sup>36</sup>) and it ends up making them see nothing but gold. All they think about is gold. All their lives are about is money. To give offerings doesn't make the *lus savdag* blind to their disrespect for nature (*baigal*). They have a wrong understanding of the teachings", my host argued fervently. "Greediness is one of the principal paths to misery. If one studies the teachings, one will learn that by caring about everybody, you yourself will be cared for. All of us can become Buddhas, we all have the potential. So by not thinking so much about yourself, because that's exactly what greediness is, right, you will be protected (*hamgalah*) by the Buddha, whose teachings tell people to show compassion (*nigüülsengüi*) and wisdom to the benefit of all".

(Field notes)

Whilst this excerpt illustrates the extent to which local spirits can be approached and related to in various ways, it also defines lamas as religious specialists positioned centrally between spirits and ninjas. Local lamas complain about the intense attachment of ninjas to this phenomenal world where they willingly pursue momentary prosperity at the cost of upsetting local spirits and fellow humans, thereby accumulating bad karma. This ignorance towards other 'existences', combined with their fixation on finding gold, turns ninjas into servants of their own greediness. However, I contend that lamas essentially facilitate gold mining since their help is necessary to prevent the wrathful spirits becoming fatal obstacles to the ninjas' pursuits. Whilst lamas may disapprove of the ninjas' actions, they mitigate impending calamities and coax spirits into bestowing onto miners the desirable *hishig* of gold. Without the safeguarding of lamas in gold mining, ninjas would soon have to give up their search for gold.

In describing gold as 'dangerous' and 'heavy', the lama above highlights that the greed driving ninjas to mine for gold is not simply rooted in a self-governing, autonomous individual. Indeed, the personal greed for money is reinforced by the 'power of gold'. As they dig into the ground and turn streams into pools of mud, ninjas are not only punished by angry spirits, but also exposed to gold's power. Enthralled to find more gold, ninjas momentarily disregard the presence of other 'existences' and willingly transgress taboos related to the land. Whilst herders strongly agree with this explanation commonly advanced by lamas, ninjas merely shake their heads in disbelief and laugh at its absurdity. Although ninjas also talk about 'the power of gold', it is usually in a radically

<sup>35</sup> My host and other lamas often used the composite verbal expression of 'to beg and cajole' (*guij argadah*).

<sup>36</sup> The term for 'power' used here (*chadvar*) denotes an organic ability rather than a passive state of power (*erh*). This dynamic conceptualisation of power is reflected, for example, in verbs of the same stem (*chad-*), such as *chadah* ('to be able to').

different way. Whilst lamas and herders describe ninjas as subservient to the spellbinding ‘power of gold’, ninjas emphasise how they can protect themselves against such dangerous power and even become its master.

## **The power of gold**

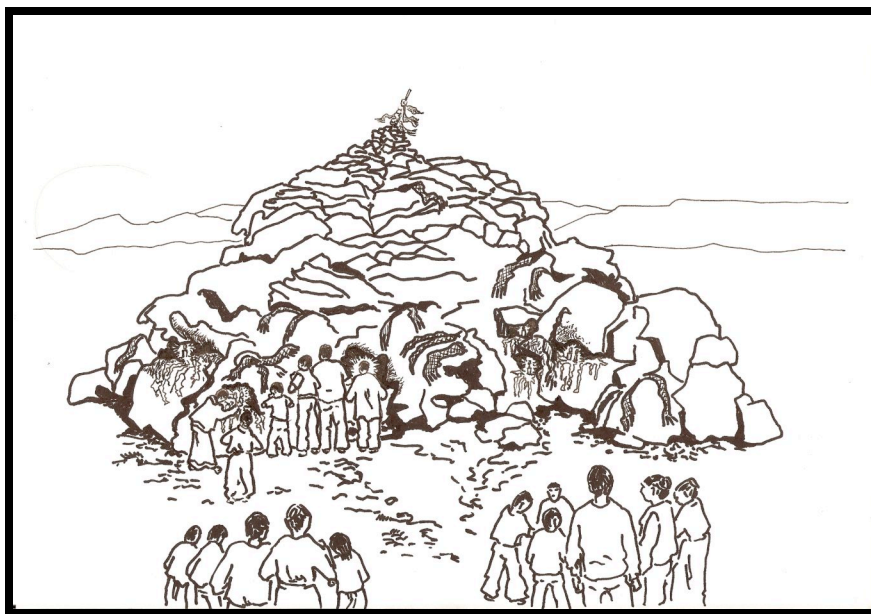
Whilst the introductory vignette to this chapter illustrates how herders and ninjas recognise mining activities as disrespectful to local spirits, I will in this section consider the extent to which the transgressive behaviour of ninjas involves more than just angry spirits and punishment. By analysing ideas about the emergence of new spirits in the mines, I will suggest that cosmologies pertaining to the landscape play a key role in the negotiation of gendered hierarchies and local participation in ninja mining.

In the mining areas of Uyanga rocky outcrops overlook the cratered valleys of mining excavation. As soon as twilight approaches, ninjas climb the steep paths to reach the rocks, where in the dark evenings a sea of lights can be seen from afar. Upon arriving in the mines, I soon asked my ninja hosts to take me along when they were next going to the offering place. Although the following excerpt from my field notes describes ritual practices that took place within the vicinity of *ovoos*, I will show how these ninja rituals differ significantly from the large communal *ovoo* rituals discussed earlier.

It was early evening and it was starting to get dark. Accompanied by our neighbours, I walked with my host family up the steep hill to the offering place. When we reached the plateau just before the last climb, we saw a large family already placing offerings at the rock. They lit candles and took turns praying in front of a bundle of blue silk ceremonial scarves (*hadag*) tied around a small part of the outcrop. They touched the rock three times with their foreheads, keeping their palms flat against each other, mumbling something inaudible. The atmosphere was solemn. They didn’t speak amongst themselves at all; even the young children were completely quiet. The father carried a bottle of vodka and the daughter a bottle of *undaa* (soft drink). When they had lit all their candles, they descended from the offering place and climbed clockwise around the outcrop. They stopped briefly at a little *ovoo* at the top of the rock before continuing down the other side. A group of people were sitting some distance away from the rock. Other people sat further down, having not yet climbed up to visit the rock. Everybody sat quietly in the darkness, waiting for people to leave. Group by group, they took turns visiting the offering place. The area was marked by silence and mutual respect.

(Field notes)

These offering places are frequented every day by male and female ninjas, and certain days, such as the eighth day (*shine naim*) and the fifteenth day (*shine arvantav*) of the lunar month, are



**Figure 11: Worship in the mines**

particularly important for worship. Given the frequency, proximity and nature of the ritual practices at offering places, visits to the rock constitute a significant part of ninja ritual and social life. Ninjas go to the rock in small groups consisting of nuclear family members, neighbours and other friends. During visits to the rock, the group-defined presence of worshippers is maintained and no interaction takes place between groups. Each group is thus presented as close and congruous to its members while also tight and impenetrable to outsiders. Living among thousands of strangers, ninjas carry out their ritual acts in bounded, stable units based on friendship and nuclear kinship, resembling the enduring agnatic groups in seasonal *ovoo* rituals<sup>37</sup>.

However, although there are small *ovoos* at the offering places in the mines, the ritual practices carried out at such places do not involve worship similar to communal *ovoo* rituals and ‘manly’ games. Ninjas do not take part in the ritual worship as a large, bounded collectivity, contributing to and celebrating in the shared reception of the spirits’ blessings. Also, the collective circumambulation of the *ovoo* and the adding of stones to the cairn are markedly absent. Strength,

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<sup>37</sup> These ritual practices seem to produce a ‘communal institution of mutual trust’ amidst a world of mistrustful strangers similar to that described by Humphrey (1993a) in the context of worship at the ‘Mother Rock’ in the turbulent early post-socialist period. However, as I will describe below, the ritual practices in the mines differ significantly from those described by Humphrey and lead to the noticeable *absence* of communality and mutual trust.



vitality and prosperity do not appear to be a communal bestowment but rather an insistent individualised quest. Such individualisation is reflected in the ways in which ninjas carry out their worship.

As they light candles, sprinkle vodka, bow to the rock and visit the *ovoo*, ninjas do not act collectively as a coherent unity, but rather as multiple individuals carrying out each act at his or her own pace. Moreover, physical and social distance is maintained throughout their presence at the rock. Although ninjas arrive in small groups, they do not talk amongst themselves during or after the worship. The intense silence is in striking contrast to the usual hustle and bustle of the mines. By terminating conversation whilst at the rock, social interaction is reduced to the physical proximity of the worshippers. As no words are spoken, their presence is only evidenced in bodily movements. In limiting a person's presence to his or her actions, I find that people move through the ritual landscape as isolated, independent entities, focusing inwards on concealed personal concerns rather than outwards towards the group. This ritual engagement with local spirits is private and in some way overtly non-communal<sup>38</sup>.

I suggest that such differences in worship are related to the presence of local spirits that differ significantly from those of the herding areas. Upon noticing that ninjas make offerings of vodka instead of the dairy products offered by herders, an elderly female ninja gave me a rare opportunity to understand better the relationship between spirits, local interaction with the landscape and ritual practices<sup>39</sup>. She told me the following:

“Oh, you mustn't sprinkle dairy products (*tsagaan idee*) here. Only vodka. You know, there are black and white *lus*, and if people don't show enough respect for them, the good white *lus* will leave. So when people dig deep holes and destroy the river, the white *lus* leaves and only the powerful (*hüitchtei*) black *lus* remains. The black *lus* is the one that can make people fall ill and cause other bad things to happen. To appease the black *lus* you must give vodka; milk or tea is for the white *lus*. That's also why you must only give offerings at night”.

(Field notes)

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<sup>38</sup> Herders strongly disapprove of the individualised worship at *ovoos* in the mining areas and claim that 'evil souls' (*chötgör*) haunt in particular these *ovoos*. “Although you never know where the 'evil souls' roam, you have to be very careful in the *ovoo* areas in the mines. I've heard that many 'evil souls' are there. It is a *güideltei gazar* (an area with 'flow', 'movement')”.

<sup>39</sup> As a male ninja told me, “we don't talk about them [spirits] here, but when we had the awful hailstorm I knew they were upset”. Whilst ideas about 'dangerous speech' (discussed in chapter 6) may discourage people from talking about local spirits, the physically and spiritually dangerous work environment may also partly explain such reluctance to verbalise the presence and anger of spirits. Since ninjas were reluctant to talk to me about local spirits, eavesdropping and observation became my primary methods of collecting data on this topic.



Ritual practices in the mines are circumscribed by ideas that highlight the marginalisation of largely benevolent white *lus* and the emerging dominance of dangerous black *lus*. It is generally agreed throughout the mining and herding areas that such black spirits did not previously exist in the area and have only arrived with the onset of the gold rush. Although black *lus* is mentioned both in Bon manuscripts (Hildegard Diemberger, personal communication) and Mongolian religious texts<sup>40</sup> (Bawden 1994a:70), it is described locally as ‘new’ (*shine*) and ‘dangerous’ (*ayultai*). The arrival of new spirits described at times of social upheaval is not unique within the regional literature. Among the Daur of Inner Mongolia, Humphrey and Onon (1996:329-342) describe how a new cult developed following radical economic and political changes in the early twentieth century. Military banners were dismantled, leaving many people with no income or land. The Chinese occupied Daur areas and introduced rapid industrialisation. It was around that time that violent “were-animals” speaking in unintelligible tongues started to wreak havoc on local households. In contrast to ancestral shamanic spirits, the new “were-animals” presented the Daur with the pressing challenge of finding ways to placate these unknown wild forces. The emergence of the “were-animal” cult thus conveys local attempts to make sense of immediate changes that were so drastic that “a new relationship between people and spirits was being created” (ibid.:333).

Drawing on Humphrey and Onon’s recognition of the locally meaningful relationship between religious practices and everyday life, I suggest that ideas about ‘new’ black spirits are closely linked to the kind of sociality in which ninjas are involved. The individual autonomy that I have argued ninjas seek is supported in the private worship of the new spirits where blessings are requested and bestowed onto each worshipper rather than a larger collectivity. In addition to the specific practices of black *lus* worship, ninjas are also seen to achieve an unmatched power of their own through such worship. By worshipping at the rocky outcrops and gathering the *hishig* of the black *lus*, ninjas come into contact with the ‘power of gold’ (*altny chadvar*); a ‘substance’ which ninjas are seen capable of redirecting onto victims through rituals of black magic. This ‘substance’ is highly potent and can cause illness among its victims. However, if ninjas are not careful in their interaction with it, they themselves can suffer from its potency, which ninjas say manifests itself through rare obsessive greed. Only a number of ninjas were said to suffer such spirit inflicted desire for gold. Recognising that ninjas may possess such powers, herding kin groups often fear that ninjas will use the ‘power of gold’ to achieve a degree of autonomy. It is the fear of curses, rather than concrete evidence of such attacks, that makes mining such a morally contentious practice in the area.

The secrecy surrounding such black magic attacks is in no way unique to the Mongolian cultural region. Indeed, the anthropological literature on witchcraft and shamanism in highly disparate areas describes the common reluctance among informants to openly discuss these matters. This reluctance may be grounded in a fear that listeners will presume that the knowledge an informant imparts reveals his or her own possible involvement in such matters. In the Mongolian context, such an association between knowledge and personal practice may be particularly pertinent since, as Humphrey and Onon state: “to know [is] to understand and have power over the object known. The Mongol and Daur verb *mede-* means both to know, recognise, or discover and to manage or rule” (1996: 324). In this sense, knowledge is not simply a question of insights but also capabilities. ‘To know’ is therefore an active position of personal agency, which reveals much more than the casual accumulation of information. It is thus not surprising that ninjas rarely talk about their reputed capabilities to redirect the ‘power of gold’. Whilst ninjas openly dismiss claims of their general subordination to the black *lus* mentioned earlier, the extent to which their involvement with ‘gold’s misfortune’ is desired and even possible is therefore hard to tell.

However, regardless of their actual skills in black magic, it is certain that ninjas are greatly feared for their power to inflict illness and even death onto potential victims. The invisible beings that ninjas are considered capable of addressing are not the largely benevolent spirits of the steppe. Ninjas do not talk about or explicitly worship *gazryn ezed*, *usan khan*, *galny ezen*, *Tsagaan Övgön* or *Tenger*. Instead, ninjas interact primarily with those invisible forces that congregate around the deep mining holes with rotting corpses and near the small *ovoos* at the ninja offering places. I suggest that these invisible beings accumulate their potency from precisely those areas where ideas of communal living cherished by herders are negated. These invisible entities do not reside in mountains, rivers or trees; that is, static markers of the landscape. Instead, they thrive in ‘areas of flow’ (*güideltei gazar*), ‘areas with no master’ (*ezengüi gazar*)<sup>41</sup>. By addressing and amassing all the uncontrollable and invisible beings that roam the landscape, ninjas are seen to hold powers that surpass those of other people. Neither lamas nor older patriarchs claim such power. Rotting corpses and individualised ritual practices thus convey not only an altered interaction with the landscape and its taboos, but also a different engagement with spiritual ‘existences’. Instead of minimising harmful interactions with the spiritual landscape, ninjas accumulate and indeed manage the anger of

<sup>40</sup> Bawden (1994a) mentions “*qara luus*” (manuscript H 66) but unfortunately does not elaborate further on its characteristics.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Areas of flow’ and ‘areas with no master’ are not limited to mining areas. For example, the same expressions are used to refer to burial grounds in both rural (Grégory Delaplace, personal communication) and urban areas (Christopher Kaplonski, personal communication).

spirits. By challenging the expected positions of respect and humility vis-à-vis the forces of *baigal*, ninjas thus position themselves beyond the hierarchies of both kinsmen and local spirits. Ignoring the masters (*ezed*) of households and land, ninjas achieve their own autonomy by pursuing their greed for gold.

## Conclusion

In a recent volume, it was suggested that anthropologists should join the ‘quiet revolution’ by making ‘the ontological turn’ (Henare et al. 2007b). By moving away from epistemology and questions of how people come to hold certain beliefs, they proposed that anthropologists should allow ‘things to speak for themselves’. In claiming that “things might be treated as *sui generis* meanings” (Henare et al. 2007a:3), they not only distanced themselves from the insights of Saussurean structural linguistics, but also advocated a return to an anthropology that was not concerned with questions of representation. “The assumption that concepts are ontologically distinct from the things to which they are ordinarily said to ‘refer’ must be discarded” (ibid.:13). By attending to the meanings as they adhere in objects, rather than in the social relations in which they are implicated or ‘constituted’, the authors oppose themselves to cultural relativistic approaches to representation and claim to be able to ‘disclose’ meaning within ‘one world’ simply ‘by conceiving it’ (ibid.:10, 15). It is thus thanks to the power of ‘conception’ that anthropologists can evade questions of how knowledge of the world is produced and rather head straight to the uncovering of ontological knowledge.

For post-‘crisis of representation’ anthropologists, such proclamations seem not only enigmatic, but also unburdening. Analytically, methodologically and ethically, this suggested ‘ontological turn’ promises a way out of many of the dilemmas we have faced over the last couple of decades. However, I contend that it is a fallacy at best, with significant and problematic implications for understanding our informants. By marginalising questions of *how* and *why* people come to hold certain beliefs, human creativity and reflexivity with regards to, for example, religious practices are de-prioritised in favour of the disclosure of synchronic meaning. By extension, since our analysis is cast as a task of revelation rather than explication, the critical relation between us and our subjects is collapsed, potentially masking our authorship as theirs. Such colonisation of our subjects involves a high risk of ethnographic distortion as it sidesteps *their* concerns and interests for *our* agenda and imagination. In this chapter I have attempted the opposite: by recognising the longevity and diversity of religious practices, I have considered how beliefs in the new black *lus* relate to practices of ninja mining and why such emerging spirits are seen as immensely powerful. That is, it is by

appreciating the historical production of sociality that beliefs come to express much more than their synchronic content.

In the first part of the chapter I examined how the spirits of the steppe areas support and reinforce patriarchal power by emphasising the *ail* and male seniority as the focus for human-spirit interactions. Whilst local taboos related to the land prescribe all individuals to suppress their disturbing wolf-like autonomy in recognition of the omnipresence of spirits, only men are allowed to take part in the essential seasonal ‘rituals of renewal’ at *ovoos*. As the spirits’ blessings (*hishig*) are shared among men according to their genealogical seniority, their *ails* are able to enjoy fertility and prosperity. With loyal daughters-in-law keeping the *deej* within the *ail* and protecting the *hishig*, the patriarchal household group thus contributes to the enduring stability of the patrician, concretely manifested in the fire cult and the *ovoos*. However, by challenging the expected positions of respect towards the forces of *baigal*, ninjas position themselves beyond the hierarchies of both kinsmen and local spirits. Repeatedly ignoring taboos related to the land, the new black *lus* dominates in the mines, wreaking havoc by withholding *hishig*, inflicting illnesses and causing accidents. As ninjas worship at the rocky outcrops and request ritual assistance from local Buddhist lamas, they try to minimise the anger of the spirits and attract growing amounts of the precious metal. Moreover, by living and working in the mines, ninjas come into contact with the ‘power of gold’ (*altny chadvar*), which herders consider to be a ‘substance’ that ninjas redirect onto victims through rituals of black magic. By moving within a landscape of rotting corpses and deep mining holes, ninjas are thus seen to hold powers that surpass those of other people. Instead of minimising harmful interactions with the spiritual landscape, ninjas accumulate and indeed manage the anger of spirits. It is thus by pursuing their selfish greed for gold that ninjas achieve a degree of autonomy from both spirits and kinsmen. Since ninjas often return to their herding household groups for shorter or longer periods, the following chapter will consider how and why such wolf-like autonomy is willingly incorporated into *ails* on the steppe.

## Chapter 6: Moral Drinking

### Introduction

It was a warm summer day, and I was relaxing on the grassy banks of the river when a female herder from a neighbouring *ail* arrived. We exchanged the standard greetings and she knelt down next to me. We chatted for a while about our chores of the day; she was out looking for a missing yak calf that had not returned the previous evening, while I was taking a break from bringing water back to my *ail*. She retrieved a handful of *aruul* from her *deel* and offered me some. Soon we found ourselves chatting about matters that were far from her concern with the missing yak calf. Although I had talked with her on a few previous occasions, it was a rare opportunity for us to meet. At one point I asked whom her husband was. She gave me a measured look and it felt as if she withdrew herself from our conversation. I probed with a few names of local male herders but she said nothing. Eventually she muttered: “my husband...now we are only my four children and me. It’s very difficult”. I asked her what had happened to her husband, and she began explaining:

“I met my husband in school. We were young and happy. Then I got pregnant and when my husband finished school, we got married. It was a peaceful time. But then he started drinking. At first he just drank a little. He really liked bottled vodka (*shiliin arhi*) and when his friends visited, they always drank vodka. But then little by little he started to drink more (*baga bagaar ilüü ih uugaad ehelsen*), and he began meeting up with ‘bad people’ (*muu hümüüs*). Then, last winter, at *Tsagaan Sar*, he didn’t come home one night. Since it was freezing cold, maybe around minus 35 degrees Celsius, I hoped that he was staying with his friends for the night. A couple of days later a herder came to our *ger*. He told us that he had found my husband on the steppe, dead. He was so drunk that he had fallen off his horse, and with our cold winter...”

(Field notes)

There was a long silence before I carefully asked how it had been possible for her husband’s drinking to reach such an excessive state. She gave me a puzzled look and said: “but people here always drink. You can’t prevent them from drinking (*arhi uuhaa bolj chadahgüi*). It’s just that, for my husband, he liked vodka too much”.

In this chapter I will consider how drinking relates to the social production of moral order among herders and miners. Rather than conceiving of the consumption of alcohol as necessarily antithetical

to local ideas about morality, I will explore drinking as an integral part of daily life. Indeed, drinking is frequently mentioned in historical manuscripts and travelogues where ‘the fondness for drink’ (Rockhill 2005 [1894]:10) in the Mongolian cultural region is repeatedly described as a striking characteristic of its people (Al-Din 1971:65, 188, Carpini 1996:51, Gilmour n.d.:190-203, Haslund 2000 [1935]:266, Komroff 1928:82-87, Lister 1976:70-73, Rockhill 2005 [1894]:10). Even today, throughout the region the consumption of alcohol is a common practice surrounded by elaborate prescriptions and cultural meanings. However, there remains a surprisingly long-standing dearth of attention in the regional anthropological literature to this widespread and frequent practice that influences everyday life in many significant ways<sup>1</sup>. This chapter aims to partly rectify this lack of regional scholarly interest.

Secondly, by considering the relationship between drinking practices and local ideas about morality, this chapter responds to the current marginalisation of drinking as a social anthropological object of study<sup>2</sup>. Since drinking is predominantly addressed through a medical anthropological framework, it is often analysed as similar to other forms of drug abuse and dependency. Only certain aspects of drinking, such as addiction, social stigma and treatments, are given particular attention. By analytically separating alcoholism from casual drinking, abusers from non-abusers, the consumption of alcohol is medicalised and institutionalised<sup>3</sup>. Whilst such a framework seeks to understand highly significant aspects of drinking, it approaches the consumption of alcohol as primarily a dysfunctional or anti-social practice (see for example McKnight 2002). That is, through this *a priori* medicalisation of drinking, its social meanings are reduced to those of degeneration, failure and desperation. In this chapter I will introduce a different approach to drinking as an object of study for social anthropologists with the aim of showing how its meanings extend far beyond the well-described social implications of sadness and sorrow.

Following a description of the historical practices of drinking among Mongols and Russians, I will examine the social consumption of alcohol in hospitality situations on the steppe. Among herders, drinking is carried out within highly formalised and hierarchical relations between host and guest. As the intoxication of the guest increases, displays of generosity often become a strained accomplishment in these contexts. Whilst the guest often desires to drink much, the host, often

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<sup>1</sup> The noticeable exception is Lacaze (2002) who has carried out research on habitual drinking in rural Mongolia and on alcoholics in Ulaanbaatar.

<sup>2</sup> The most influential study of drinking in social anthropology is most likely *Constructive Drinking* by Mary Douglas (1987). However, there is little sense of a cohesive interest in this topic (see debate in *Anthropology Today* 2006, in particular Mills (2006:1)).

reluctantly, has to show generous hospitality<sup>4</sup>. As the expectations of the guest and the generosity of the host are often visibly at odds in social drinking situations, I suggest that the social consumption of alcohol underlines the general tension in reproducing hierarchical relations in situations of expected lavish hospitality. Among ninjas, however, similar hierarchical relations are not generally expressed in communal drinking situations. Without a formal hierarchy between host and guest, ninja drinking involves men and women, young and old. In the mines, the social consumption of alcohol is often surrounded by fears of poisoning and sometimes evolves into violent brawls. Given such different drinking practices, I will show how the ‘dangerous strangers’ (*gadny ulsuud*) from the mines are incorporated into the sociality of herding *ails* by performing the practice of ‘fake drinking’ (*hudlaa sogtuu*) whereby ninjas pretend to be drunk. This practice is common in the herding areas among those herders who spend part of their time in the mines. As discussed in chapter two, in Uyanga trickery is a valued skill that asserts intimate knowledge of and inclusion in the local area. I therefore suggest that ‘fake drinking’ is not only an apt way to hear gossip about oneself and to assert status, but is also a strategy for local ninjas to consolidate their moral inclusion in the herding areas. In accepting the hospitality that goes with drinking in the countryside, male visitors position themselves firmly as locals as opposed to strangers from the mining areas. The variation in drinking practices is thus fundamental to the incorporation of miners who have distanced themselves from their patriarchal kin groups and local spirits.

## **A history of drinking**

In this section I will provide a brief historical overview of Mongolian drinking practices in order to show how consumption of alcohol is not a recent feature of Mongolian life. That is, although centuries of drastic social, political and economic changes have undoubtedly led to changing understandings of drinking, the practice of drinking has formed an enduring cornerstone of daily life for as long as our historical manuscripts record. The heavy drinking that has shortened many lives, as described in the introductory vignette, is thus not a unique reaction to the onset of a local gold rush, but rather forms an intrinsic part of Mongolian tradition and everyday conviviality.

Prior to the Mongol Empire, fermented mare’s milk (*airag*, or *esüg* as it was then called) appears to have been the only alcoholic drink consumed by the Mongols. It was traditionally considered a

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the large literature on Alcoholics Anonymous, such as Brandes (2002), Wilcox (1998) and McCrady and Miller (1993).

medicinal drink, taken for chronic lung diseases, coughs, stomach pains, scurvy and gout<sup>5</sup> (Atwood 2004:322). Since *airag* has an alcohol content between 1.65 percent to 3.25 percent (Lane 2006:151) and is thus not greatly intoxicating, the Mongols had to consume substantial amounts before reaching a state of drunkenness. Indeed, a missionary to the Mongol courts in the thirteenth century reported how Batu Khan received “the milk of three thousand mares every day” (Dawson 1980a:99)<sup>6</sup>. Although mares do not yield more than about two litres of milk per day, the Mongol khans received enough milk from their subjects to host great banquets with more than 40’000 guests who were served endless amounts of *airag*. As soon as the khan lifted his drinking cup, a minstrel started playing and the guests started dancing. When he put the cup down, the music stopped and the guests were expected to drink (ibid.:96-97). For entertainment, guests also took part in intense drinking challenges and “when any of them has taken more drink than his stomach can well bear, he calls it up and falls to drinking again” (Komroff 1928:31). Heavy drinking and drunkenness seemed not only socially acceptable, but indeed common and desirable. As described by Lane, “heavy drinking was a defining characteristic of Mongol daily life. (..) In the case of a number of khans and even Great Khans this was literally true, and alcohol was openly admitted as the cause of death” (2006:149).

With the expansion of the Mongol Empire, an increasing variety of alcoholic beverages were introduced to the courts and alcoholic drinking was no longer restricted to the summer months when mare’s milk was available. Soon the Mongols also drank rice mead, rice ale, honey mead, fermented millet and red grape wine (Lane 2006:154)<sup>7</sup>. As distillation processes enabled beverages with higher alcohol content to be made, Chinggis Khan warned against the uninhibited consumption of wine. In the body of laws and practices decreed by Chinggis Khan and his successors (*jasag*, modern *zasag*), he proclaimed:

A drunkard is like one who is blind, deaf, and insane, he cannot even stand erect but is like a man that is struck upon the head. Regardless of what talent or training a person may have, to the drunkard these things are useless, all he will receive from others is insults. The ruler who becomes addicted to wine can never undertake a great enterprise. A general who likes wine can

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<sup>4</sup> In hospitality situations that do not centre around the consumption of alcohol, the host is usually highly generous. However, as I will discuss later in this chapter, social drinking situations involve not only lengthy stays by drunken visitors but also fears of ‘evil souls’ (*chötgör*). Hospitality in drinking situations is therefore a strained accomplishment.

<sup>5</sup> *Airag* is high in vitamins A, B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>12</sub>, and C, with small amounts of vitamin E (Atwood 2004:322).

<sup>6</sup> Batu Khan was Chinggis Khan’s grandson and was a viceroy in the Western parts of the empire. He died in 1255.

<sup>7</sup> Many Mongol khans seem to have become particularly fond of grape wine, and it is said that wine saved Europe from conquest by the Mongols. As Ögödei Khan, who is described as a relentless drinker, died of a stroke in 1241 after drinking wine, his generals held a great assembly to elect a new khan and his armies therefore ceased moving into Europe (Jagchid and Hyer 1979:42-43).



never control his troops. Whoever it may be who has this evil habit it will certainly lead to disaster. The person who cannot desist from this habit it would be better for him if he would get drunk but three times a month. If only one time this would be even better. However, best of all is total abstinence. But where may I find such a man? (quoted in Jagchid and Hyer 1979:42).

Despite such warnings, his own son Ögödei Khan did not heed his message and died from excessive drinking. A similar fate terminated the rule of Ögödei's successor Güyük Khan as well as several other Mongol khans. However, alcoholic beverages were not only used for consumption. Historical manuscripts describe how the Mongols sprinkled *airag* towards the altars and fires of *gers* and towards the sky and onto the ground (Komroff 1928:82-83). By honouring spirits and *Tenger*, these libations, still carried out today, ensured the continuing blessing of people and herds. As described in the previous chapter, by attracting the *hishig* bestowed by spirits, the *ail* received benevolent material conditions for its continued prosperity and fertility. The abundance of *airag* was thus not simply a product of human labour, but also a manifestation of the *hishig* bestowed by spirits. In using *airag* in libations rather than, say, imported grape wine, Mongols not only made offerings that were associated with their particular *ail* and its skills in dairy-production, but also displayed generosity with a product intimately related to the blessings of spirits. *Airag* was thus positioned within a recursive relationship based on acts of giving between humans and spiritual beings. In this light, *airag* was a radically different drink from imported alcoholic beverages, which did not have a similarly direct relation to spirits and *hishig*. Before drinking *airag*, as opposed to other alcoholic drinks, people sprinkled some of it to the cardinal directions, as well as to the sky and the ground (ibid.:83). Moreover, at the beginning and end of the mare-milking season, "the great khans, accompanied by a shaman, offered to heaven, the ancestors (..), and other deities aspersions of fermented mare's milk taken from herds of pure white horses" (Atwood 2004:532). It is possible that acts of libation and the consumption of *airag* were conceived within this larger framework of spirits' generosity. That is, as drinkers received and consumed *airag*, the generosity of spirits was acknowledged, thus enabling the continuous recreation of respectful giving. *Airag* sustained and vitalised both the drinker and his or her relation to spiritual beings. Consequently, statements such as "drunkenness is honourable among the Tatars" (Lane 2006:149) speak beyond the unquestionable gluttony of the Mongols, of at least the royal courts, and highlight the central position of *airag* within relations of respectful giving.

Whilst it appears that *airag* was the only beverage used in libations during the Mongol Empire, tea and other beverages were later incorporated into the ritual complex. In the late sixteenth century, at the height of Buddhist conversion, tea entered Mongolia. Tea was already an indispensable part of

Tibetan Buddhist monastic life (Atwood 2004:184) and in Mongolia it soon spread among lamas and laity alike. At *Tsagaan Sar*, libations of tea were offered to *Tenger*. Today, every fresh brew of tea involves tea libations, just as every milking round of mares involves milk libations. In the evening tea is offered to ensure the protection of herd and people, and tea or milk libations are carried out at seasonal *ovoo* rituals or in situations of misfortune (such as the hailstorm described in chapter five). Before drinking *airag* or vodka, people also dip their ring finger in the beverage and flick it three times in the direction of the sky (see also Sneath 2000:222). With the growing availability of other beverages, ritual libations are no longer restricted to *airag*, but now include products such as vodka that are purchased in shops and require no direct domestic labour for its production. Although Mongols revere *airag* more than any other drink, I suggest that distilled alcohol is now integrated into the cultural framework of human hospitality and respectful giving to spirits.

As modern nation states developed, beverages became crucial to relations with spirits and fellow humans, as well as the state itself. In the case of Tsarist Russia, the taxation of vodka formed a cornerstone of the national budget as revenue from vodka sales amounted to forty-eight percent of the treasury (Moscow News 2007)<sup>8</sup>. Vodka was a highly profitable commodity for the state and for the tavern-keepers, and growing sales were actively encouraged. Moreover, since tavern-keepers' profits depended on the amount of vodka sold, adulterated spirits and counterfeit products flourished on the Russian vodka market (Christian 1990:138). With a long-standing history of heavy alcohol consumption, the reported average annual consumption in Russia rose sharply following the collapse of the Soviet socialist regime. Whilst it was reported to be 5.4 litres of pure alcohol per citizen in 1990, it has now reached more than fifteen litres (Reuters 2007).

Given the seventy years of Soviet-influenced socialist rule in Mongolia, Russian drinking practices have left their imprint on people's drinking as well as their historical imagination. As a Mongolian recently described,

I think it's a tragedy that Mongolians drink so much (...) My father didn't drink, old men don't drink, it's just our generation; we were influenced by the Russians. They would tell us, 'Why

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<sup>8</sup> See Christian (1990:186-217) for a detailed discussion of vodka taxation in Russia between 1767 and 1858. Although 48% of government revenue may seem disproportionately high, in 19<sup>th</sup> century England alcohol generated over 30% (Harrison 1994:346).

don't you drink? You are a man! Now get it down!' It became a habit for most of us. Many of my friends are still alcoholics (Kohn 2006:75)<sup>9</sup>.

Attributing the current intense consumption of vodka to the past presence of Russians is common. However, as I have shown in this section, alcoholic beverages have formed a consistent and significant part of everyday life in the region for centuries. The fact that Chinggis Khan included a decree on the dangers of distilled alcohol conveys both the prevalence of drinking among the Mongols and their insatiable thirst for strong liquors. By highlighting the central use of beverages in ritual interactions with spirits and *Tenger*, I have suggested that traditionally drinking formed part of a ritualised framework of respectful giving. Since the act of giving is seen to sustain the production of personhood, as described in chapter four, drinkers positioned themselves within an intense sociality implicating spirits as well as fellow humans.

### **Drinking on the steppe**

Since herders predominantly consume alcohol in social visiting situations, I will in this section focus on the relationship between drinking and hospitality. As formal relationships between host and guest inform these visits, the consumption of alcohol underlines the general tension in reproducing hierarchical social relations in the context of lavish hospitality.

Drinking among herders is carried out almost exclusively by men, and my insights into such practices were therefore restricted by this gendered division. I never had the opportunity during fieldwork to accompany my herding father and brothers on visits from which they returned drunk. Such visits were most often carried out in conjunction with daily herding trips, and since women do not generally assist men in such herding tasks, I had to stay behind with the rest of the *ail*. The men left on their herding trips in the morning and returned in the early evening. As they collapsed on the bed, I often sympathised with them, envisaging their demanding task of walking or riding across the mountains all day, making sure the herd of several hundred animals stayed together. I would gladly pass them a cup of salty milk tea and reply to their enquiries as to what I had done that day together with my herding mother and sisters: milked the animals, collected firewood and yak dung for fuel, drawn water from the river, prepared cream, yoghurt, cheese, dried milk curd, tea and, of course, made homebrewed yak milk vodka (*shimiin arhi*).

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<sup>9</sup> Rossabi notes that 52% of Mongolian men were diagnosed as alcoholics in the early 1990s (2005:147).

As men from other *ails* frequented our *ger* during the day, I started to realise what men's herding partly entailed. Animals generally know where they are going, and so do the men; in the latter case it often being to a *ger* for the first drink. After having some homebrewed vodka, they continue a little further before stopping at the next. As the men circulated between the *gers* in the valley, they allowed me a view into their visiting practices; not by taking me with them, but rather by having me host those who came to our *ger* for a drink.

These visits take place several times a day throughout the area, especially in the summer months when there is an abundance of *shimiin arhi* and *airag*. I have been able to observe the ways in which numerous households interact with visitors, as guests often arrived at households that I was visiting at the time. The generalising tone of the description below is intended to communicate the regularity of such recurrent practices since the large majority of visiting (both drinking and non-drinking situations) replicate the same formal interactions.

During a typical summer day, female members of the household rise early to start the first round of yak milking. When the large milk containers are filled, they begin making *shimiin arhi* from the thin fermented milk (*undaa*). Depending on the herd size, women generally distil two to four litres of *shimiin arhi* every day. As the *ger* starts to smell increasingly of alcohol distillation, male visitors arrive on horses or Russian motorbikes. The guests take a seat near the altar in the Northern part of the *ger*, and if a male member of the *ail* has not yet left for his herding duties, he joins the guests in tasting the warm vodka of the day. In such cases, the guests will discretely move closer to one side and allow the male host to sit near the altar. The mother or older daughter first serves a bowl of the strong spirit to the household head, if he is present. She then refills it and serves the guests. After the first serving, a half-litre bottle is placed next to the guests so that they can serve themselves. If the visitors are strangers or drunk at the time of visiting, only a single bowl is likely to be served and no second servings given. The host and other women generally never take part in the drinking unless the guests insistently offer her some. In such a situation, she will taste the alcohol but never drink it all. Trays with snacks, such as *aruul* and sweetened 'butter' (*hailmag*), are handed to the guests, and if the hosting household wishes to show further generosity, fresh servings of *öröm*, slices of bread or Russian sweets are also given. Conversation between the host and guest is often limited to an exchange of formal greetings, as I will discuss later in this chapter. While the host continues to carry out her usual duties, the guests might roll a cigarette, lean back and relax. Such a visit may range greatly in duration, ranging from five minutes to longer than a day.

Such visiting situations are informed by strict ideas about appropriate interactions between guest and host. The gendered hierarchical ordering of daily life is asserted during visits in multiple ways, ranging from the use of space and restricted conversation to legitimate demands and acceptable behaviour. Whilst the guests sit in the honoured Northern part of the *ger*, hosting women remain in the area near the stove. As the guests initiate conversation, the host merely responds and possibly asks a few questions related to the topic brought up by the guests. The guests may occupy the *ger* and stay there as long as they like, whereas the host is unlikely to ever insist or force visitors to leave. Lastly, while the host may engage with the guests in only a few, prescribed manners, the guest may behave in almost any imaginable way. The entire visiting situation is centred on the guests, and any interaction between host and guests extending beyond the latter's requests for alcohol and snack is generally limited. However, the guests' expectations of being met with unremitting generosity can become a great burden for women who are expected to meet the demands of intoxicated guests, whilst also negotiating the extent to which hospitality will be shown. Despite the great extent to which hospitality is enacted through prescribed verbal and physical interactions, women who are actively reproducing such practices often do not see them in a positive light. At a time when drunken visitors continued to arrive at our *ger*, one of my host sisters expressed her concern with the taxing expectations of hospitality:

“Mum always gives visitors something to drink, even something to eat. When you always give, people remember that and will always come to your *ail* again. Now they know that they can get *arhi* (alcohol, especially vodka) from here. But it's hard for mum with all these drunken people. They make her tired, so after serving them once she'll leave the *ger* and wait outside. If she stays inside, people will just ask her for more *arhi*. Dad insists (*shaardah*) that she gives because we have many animals and people know that...so if we don't give, people will get upset and talk badly about us. We have to give”.

(Field notes)

As expressed in the above excerpt from my field notes, visiting situations at times involve significant pressure on the host to acknowledge and at least visibly attempt to satisfy the demands of expected hospitality. Families cannot afford to risk offending visitors due to the constant concerns about rumours and malicious gossip (*hel am*), as discussed in chapter four. However, visiting situations also allow people to cross social, regional and economic divides to build up dependable relationships of practical support. Living in a remote location, important networks of mutual assistance are created and sustained through visiting and drinking. As such, the act of giving involved in drinking situations vitalises and balances crucial relations between people as well as with spirits.

## Dangerous speech

In order to better understand the significance of alcohol in acts of giving, I will in this section consider how herders describe the ontological status of drunken visitors. By focussing on discursive practices during visits, I will show that the fear of being seen as a miserly host is related to negotiations of hospitality and expectations beyond the household, as well as attempts to minimise the attraction of malevolent *chötgörs* (evil soul) to the *ail*.

Before any casual conversation is initiated during a visit, the guest and host exchange a few standard and seasonal greetings. The visitor may continue to ask such formal questions, building up an extended rhetorical dialogue lasting up to fifteen minutes. Such discursive practices are most often carried out by people commonly accorded high status, such as lamas from major Buddhist monasteries, members of parliament from the countryside and wealthy herders. Following such exchange of greetings, informal conversation about appropriate topics such as family matters and the state of the herd may ensue.

However, in drinking situations the drunken guests might not observe such restrictions on conversation and talk about matters that are considered highly inappropriate by the hosting *ail*. Members of the household group therefore often stay away from the *ger* when such people visit, leaving the female host alone with the guests. A household head tried to explain to me what he feared from the unimpeded conversation of such visitors.

“Some people always talk nonsense (*degs dogs yardag*) and you have to be careful with such people. They’ll suddenly talk about deceased people, wolves, people who’ve done bad things such as hunters who haven’t observed particular taboos or men who have cut down fresh branches of trees. They’ll also tell me that our herd has been seen strayed in the mountains up north. I’ll then hurry to fetch the herd, only to realise that they had misinformed me (*demii yarih*, lit. ‘idle talk’). They shouldn’t talk like that, it’s bad. Maybe bad things will happen to our *ail*. Maybe a wolf will come the next night, maybe someone will fall ill. A drunken man’s talk can be dangerous (*ayultai*)”.

(Field notes)

As opposed to non-verbal action, speech carries exceptional potential for causing calamities. It is considered the most forceful medium for attracting the attention of spirits and other invisible beings

(*haragdagгүй yum*). As described in the previous chapter, spirits hear and see everything, yet their attention rises and falls according to the particular kind of human action taking place. To explicitly and audibly state that which should never be said aloud, people are not only disrespectful to spirits, but also position themselves as autonomous and selfish agents through the act of speaking. Dangerous speech thus achieves its potency from both the actual content of the utterance and the very act of speaking.

Since dangerous speech risks bringing calamities upon the speaker himself or his host, it is not surprising that I was explicitly told that ‘people who really like to drink’ (*uuh mash ih durtai hümüüs*) are not like other people. To welcome the anger of spirits is not something most people would voluntarily seek. By considering local ideas about excessive drinking, I will show how dangerous speech highlights the potential presence of feared spiritual entities.

Whilst most men in the area like to drink and do so every day, some men are considered compelled to drink and are labelled ‘*arhichin*’ by others. The term *arhichin* is most often used in formal medical contexts, such as in reference to anti-drinking medication and national campaigns against alcoholism. In daily language the word carries strong moral connotations, positioning the speaker as morally superior to the person labelled an *arhichin*. The precise definition of who is and who is not an *arhichin* cannot be easily conveyed, since it depends on discursive acts (such as the particular speaker, the general situation and the audience) and on personal experiences (such as the phenomenological knowledge of drinking and drinkers). It is not simply a question of outlining particular behavioural proclivities or psychological predispositions. Nor is it a matter of medical history or distinct social idiosyncrasy. As a result, someone who has never been seen in a highly intoxicated state may be rumoured to be an *arhichin*. Also, someone who used to drink heavily but decades later avoids alcohol may still be considered a potential *arhichin*. In this sense, the notion of the *arhichin* can be applied to drinkers generally since they all carry the *potential* for revealing their true nature as excessive drinkers.

This ambiguous labelling, grounded in personal experience and intimate knowledge of drinkers and their pasts, thus gives rise to great concern among the hosting household, since its members are never certain what kind of guest they are hosting. On a few occasions men and women from different *ails* confided in me why this uncertainty gives rise to great unease, for example:

“Many people drink too much. They drink all day from early morning till late evening. They can’t work anymore, they only drink. Such people, I think, have a *chötgör* inside them. That’s

why they're so dangerous for us. If we don't show them hospitality and give them something to drink, you never know what they might do. They can harm (*horloh*<sup>10</sup>) you and your family really badly..."

(Field notes)

As described in the previous chapter, *chötgör* is considered highly dangerous and often associated with places such as funerary sites and mining areas. If a person suffers a premature death by accident, illness or suicide, the 'soul'<sup>11</sup> (*süns*) of the deceased person will remain hungry for life and refuse to leave the realm of the living. Whereas some *chötgörs* are identified as the souls of particular people, others seem to be an abstracted source of evil intent. Intruding maliciously in the life of the living, *chötgörs* are most feared for their capacity to steal healthy *süns* during sleep or at times of serious illness or sadness<sup>12</sup>. Since people cannot live long without their *süns*, they will slowly become weaker and eventually die. I was often told that: "If somebody inexplicably dies, it is certain to be a *chötgör*"<sup>13</sup>. *Chötgörs* can also inflict harm by suddenly attacking animals and people. Such attacks are manifested in inexplicable illness and require assistance from ritual specialists to avoid fatal consequences. However, Buddhist lamas at the Uyanga monastery are often hesitant to carry out such rituals if the concerned person is near dying. Moreover, in instances of premature deaths, the local lamas also rarely offer to carry out the funerary rituals and purification rites considered necessary for the peaceful departure of the *süns*. The lamas claimed that: "we aren't that powerful" (*bid nar tiim hüchtei bish*) and "it's too dangerous" (*arai ayultai*). They explained that the roaming *chötgörs* cannot easily be handled and are best approached by more experienced lamas from larger Buddhist centres in Mongolia. Yet, it is also possible that local lamas simply do not wish to expose themselves to such dangerous entities since they already have abundant requests from ninjas. As they receive generous contributions for their services to ninjas, they are now becoming significantly wealthy without having to confront *chötgörs*. As local lamas are reluctant to participate in crucial funerary rites or exorcise (*tonilgoh*) *chötgörs*, people in Uyanga have to live with the dangerous invisibles and their insatiable appetite for life<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The verb *horloh* carries meanings such as 'to harm', 'to hurt' and 'to poison' (Bawden 1997:450).

<sup>11</sup> Following conventional translation in the regional literature, I translate the word *süns* with 'soul'. However, I distance myself from Cartesian notions of the 'soul', and in terms of semantics align myself closer to words like 'ghost'. This is primarily due to the ways in which *süns* are represented as feared human-like agents.

<sup>12</sup> A person's *süns* leaves the body during sleep and goes to different places. What a person sees in a dream, it was explained to me, is what the 'soul' is seeing. At such moments, the attachment of the *süns* to the person is particularly weak and may thus be tricked relatively easily by the *chötgör* to not return. I was repeatedly warned never to abruptly wake somebody, as the sleeping person's *süns* might not be able to return in time.

<sup>13</sup> *Herev hen neg n uchir bitüülgeer öngörvöl, ter n chötgör boloh n damjiggüi.*

<sup>14</sup> Apparently 10 years ago, herders were so affected by the evil interferences of a *chötgör* that they called upon Buddhist lamas from the capital to carry out powerful purification rituals. After several days of elaborate rituals, the lamas finally announced that the *chötgör* had been exorcised and a memorable celebration ensued.



I suggest that, by seeing an *arhichin* as having a *chötgör* inside him, herders contemplate the peculiar intentionality behind dangerous speech. Given the risks involved in uninhibited speech, the speaker cannot be like all other drinkers. The motivation and willingness to invite harm are placed beyond local sociality and identified with spiritual forces that direct the drinker as a mere bodily vessel. As such, the transgressive behaviour of *arhichins*, asserting selfish autonomy and ignorance of other ‘existences’, is not a product of greedy humans but rather of malevolent invisibles. Also, in commenting on the growing alcoholisation of the region, where people spend ‘polluted money’ (*buzartai möngö*) earned from ninja mining on alcohol (see chapter four), herders partake in a discourse that is very common throughout the country. Many people consider such general tendencies of increasing alcohol consumption to be a product of the Russian legacy in Mongolia, as reflected in the earlier quotation by a young Mongolian man. However, I suggest that herders’ complaints about intensified drinking and growing numbers of potential *arhichins* in Uyanga can also be seen as a discourse of frustration and political marginalisation against local lamas and their reluctance to exorcise the life-threatening forces of *chötgörs*. Since lamas are reluctant to assist in minimising spiritual dangers, they have come to be seen as selfish as the miners they serve. The struggle against *chötgörs* and their manifestation in *arhichins* requires collective action that lamas are currently not willing to support.

The criticised selfishness that herders see as so threatening and widespread lies, I believe, at the core of the definition of an *arhichin*. In the introductory vignette of this chapter, a female herder described how she could not do anything to prevent her husband from drinking as excessively as he did. His drinking was beyond her control and influence, even though her labour produced the very *shimiin arhi* on which he sustained his drunkenness. As people become absorbed in drinking, they leave daily work and responsibility to members of the *ail* in order to pursue the generous hospitality of others. Repeatedly visiting those households that give readily, the *arhichin* moves through the local landscape as a feared abuser of hospitality and generosity. As he hoards what he is given, he rarely gives anything himself. With a cultural emphasis on the act of giving, such hoarding excludes others and prevents him from becoming a full person<sup>15</sup>. By taking rather than giving, the *arhichin* epitomises selfish greed with no concern for family members or others. As such, the belief in a *chötgör* residing within the *arhichin* helps us understand why the female herder felt unable to prevent her husband from continuing his fatal drinking. Moreover, it also forms a powerful moral

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<sup>15</sup> Alcoholics in Ulaanbaatar are commonly regarded as ‘less than human’ (Lacaze, personal communication), at times seen as evidence of a ‘wrong’ rebirth where the person attained a much higher corporeality than was originally intended.

commentary against the self-orientation of the *arhichin* whose socially and individually destructive actions underscore the potential presence of an ‘evil soul’, hungry for the life of humans.

This association between *chötgörs* and the *arhichin* reflects also an intense expression of idealised sociality, missed so strongly by *chötgörs*. As the *chötgör* longs for partaking in the life of living people, drinking situations provide the perfect forum for its appearance. Taking the position of guest to be served generously by its host, the *chötgör* positions itself as quintessentially human-like. As the *chötgör* is momentarily freed from roaming the steppe, it is positioned within an accommodating spiritual landscape of human and spirit owners who do not evict it despite its dangerous potential. As such, drinking situations provide a unique forum for accepting and incorporating dangerous entities in the celebration of harmonious sociality. I will later in the chapter show how *chötgörs* are not the only dangerous entities that find acceptance in the social drinking on the steppe.

### **The perils of ninja drinking**

In this section I will discuss the significance of drinking in the mining areas, where the social consumption of alcohol is not informed by the same formal hospitality as among herders. This is despite the fact that many ninjas come from the herding areas and are still periodically involved in herding. As drinking in the mines at once involves the joyous consolidation of friendship and exposure to the uncertain intentions of strangers, such drinking is viewed by both herders and miners as potentially engendering a feared anarchy of strangers instigating fights and even deaths, as described in chapter three. However, given the general cultural value placed on drinking and the prescribed consumption of ‘polluted money’ (*buzartai möngö*) on immediate goods and processes, the perils of ninja drinking are part of mining life with its ethos of apparent autonomy.

In contrast to my previous descriptions of drinking on the steppe, the following excerpt from my field notes concerns a drinking session in which my husband and I participated as guests. Apart from illustrating the relatively unstructured and informal interactions between host and guests, I intend to convey the singularity and distinctiveness of visiting among ninjas. Generalised statements about ninja drinking are therefore not based on the repetitive instantiation of the same template of hospitality to nearly the same degree as among herders, but rather on the recurrence of ad-hoc interactions and dissimilar expectations. In the drinking situation described below, such ‘flexible’ visiting practices allow for the sudden eruption of a fight and the relaxed continuation of social drinking once the fighting was taken outdoors.

In the evening we visited our neighbours whose *ger* was sparsely furnished with only two storage boxes, one stool and a stove. No table, nor any beds. The Northern half of the *ger* had the floor covered with old felt on which everybody sat. People welcomed us warmly, making space for us next to the older brother, who was drinking vodka in a small, seemingly closed circle. The men were keen to include us, and the older brother quickly passed us numerous servings in fast succession without serving the others in between. Another bottle of vodka suddenly appeared, bought by one of the men from the nearby shop. The two men served vodka in what seemed a rather improvised order. Sometimes women were included, sometimes the same person would receive several glasses in succession. A bottle was handed over to another person, who then served the people sitting there. As people relaxed together, a young lad suddenly became embroiled in a heated and aggressive argument with an older, visibly injured man. As the injured man whispered to the men next to him, the lad jumped at him, threatening him with a fist and an invitation to take the fight outside. Everybody told him to calm down and leave the *ger*. Before leaving he couldn't resist punching the injured man, who instantly chased after him. As soon as the men had left the *ger*, people apologised to us and resumed the drinking rounds.

(Field notes)

As evidenced in this excerpt, social drinking in the ninja mining areas is generally much more informal and chaotic than on the steppe. Although the population density in the mines would practically strain and financially ruin a household that tried to reproduce the lavish hospitality of herding households, such hospitality is seldom even attempted by ninjas. Whilst it is practically possible, for example, for women to purchase and serve the vodka, both men and women, young and old, buy the alcohol locally and help in serving it. Since there is no single host, anyone can take the bottle and serve him or herself or others. At times there is a single drinking bowl circulating from person to person; at other times there are multiple bowls in circulation. Also, one person can position him or herself as the host, or nobody may act as the host. To complicate matters further, people also occupy space within the *ger* very differently. Since many *gers* contain plastic tubes, oily generators, dirty mining equipment and muddy motorbikes, there is rarely any consistency as to where one can sit. Each *ger* is unique, even at different times of the day. For example, in the morning a motorbike might prevent visitors from sitting near the stove, whereas in the afternoon such a space may be the only spot available. People also furnish *gers* in varying ways, depending on whether the inhabitants are temporary or long-term miners, their relative wealth as well as area of origin. Upon entering a *ger*, a visitor can thus never fully envisage the particular use of space, the preferred topics of conversation or the expected interactions within the household. The consistent

spatial lay-out of a herding *ger* and the predictable interactions that take place within such space is thus far from the reality of social life in the mines.

Within this variable environment, the display of hospitality is adaptive to the particular audience present and the ways in which those people interact. Instead of reiterating a peaceful sociality of hierarchical differentiation, drinking practices among ninjas can be seen to reproduce a magnified expression of tense daily conviviality. As men and women reach increasing drunken states, their physical and verbal actions accentuate individual differences between the people present, and in the absence of formalised hospitality, arguments and brawls often arise. Instead of expressing an impersonal allocation of social roles, drinking situations produce an intense sociality where personal distinctions and differences are heightened rather than concealed. As such, I suggest that drinking practices in the mines assert the equivalence of personal differences rather than their ranking, thus allowing for the expression of individual autonomy among the drinkers present.

As ninjas circumvent the expectations and demands of patriarchal herding households, their pursuit of friendship both allows for greater personal freedom and leads to much uncertainty and mistrust. In a large and heterogeneous population, bound up predominantly through ties of friendship and labour, drinking situations with unfamiliar others inevitably arise. In the absence of formal obligations to show respect, strangers may turn their relatively autonomous conviviality, expressed through drinking, into feared encounters as the excerpt from my field notes below shows:

Together with the hosting family, we sat around the single candle, eating pine nuts, when three acquaintances (*tanil*) suddenly paid us a visit. They were already drunk, and upon seeing my husband, they asked if he wanted to drink beer with them. As he accepted their invitation, the men got up and insisted that he come along. The hosting father raised his voice angrily: “They are foreigners (*gadaadyn hüümüüs*). They don’t drink like you. Why do you have to do this? Stop it and go. Leave us alone!” The entire family chimed in with the father, speaking out against the visitors, who reluctantly left. The hosting father and mother turned towards us and said: “Here there are people from all over Mongolia and you never know what they might do. They might say they’ll drink beer but someone will add poison (*hor*) to it and people will get drunk really quickly. Fights will erupt and people might be pushed or accidentally fall into mining holes. It’s dangerous. Many people die because of drinking, both men and women. And they’re so careless and disrespectful. It’s dangerous”.

(Field notes)

Numerous stories circulate in the mining areas about fights, accidents and deaths caused by drinking with strangers. A seemingly common scenario involved the unnoticed addition of undiluted industrial alcohol (*sprit*) to a person's drink. Upon drinking the concoction, the person unwittingly becomes extremely intoxicated and the strangers subsequently beat up the victim and steal all of his or her possessions. Other rumours described how such poisoned drinkers accidentally fall into mining holes. Since the mining holes in some areas are up to eighteen metres deep, such a fall can have serious, if not fatal, consequences. In other cases, victims are more fortunate and simply wake up hours later with a non-responsive tongue, paralysed by the strong alcohol. As the tongue apparently never recovers, such a person becomes subject to intense ridicule and social ostracism, becoming a testament to the dangers of drinking with strangers. Stories of such malicious trickery flourish and are narrated far beyond the mining areas.

In discussing such drinking on the steppe, herders invariably distance themselves from the actions of the victim by commenting on his or her own compliance: "Well, he himself wanted to drink with strangers. That's what happens..." In casting the calamity as self-inflicted, herders position themselves as morally and practically above the interactions between ninjas. Moreover, by glossing over the individual traits of perpetrators in their descriptions, herders represent miners as a generalised and monolithic figure of affliction. As such, the perpetrators remain stereotypical strangers (*gadny ulsuud*), existing beyond any identifiable bond of kinship (see chapter three). Having denied the demands and expectations of kinsmen, strangers are represented as highly dangerous, capable of showing cold disregard for others to the extent of engaging in lethal drinking. Instead of celebrating amicable conviviality, ninja drinking thus appears to culminate in its opposition: death and social anarchy.

However, the picture painted by ninjas adds another dimension. Emphasising how social drinking is intrinsic to Mongolian ways of life, whether in the capital or in the countryside, ninjas view drinking situations as a crucial part of everyday conviviality. Given the heterogeneous mining population, I suggest that drinking is indeed a shared practice that allows ninjas to establish relationships with strangers and nourish ties of friendships. Asserting the equivalence of personal differences, drinking in the mines appears particularly apt at accommodating a varied population and sustaining a form of sociality that stresses autonomy rather than hierarchy. As such, drinking can be seen to celebrate the unification of ninja miners. Regardless of their diverse geographical backgrounds and personal histories, drinkers are allowed their idiosyncrasy in the ninja drinking practices. Indeed, as 'polluted money' (*buzartai möngö*) is best spent on non-enduring objects such as alcohol (see chapter four), involvement in mining strongly supports the more general emphasis

on social drinking. However, since drinking among strangers invariably brings up suspicion and fear, ninjas readily express their ambivalent feelings about partaking in the social drinking. In this sense, drinking in the mines balances tenuously between integrative autonomy and lethal anarchy.

### **Moral drinking**

In Uyanga, local economic circuits, social relationships and spiritual landscapes transcend the stark physical and ideological division between the steppe and the mines, bringing herders and miners into close proximity on a regular basis. In this final section I will examine how the feared ‘strangers’ of the mines, in seeking autonomy from burdens of patriarchal relations, are re-incorporated into their herding households. Transgressing fundamental taboos related to the land, upsetting spirits and patriarchs in the search for heavy and dangerous gold, the physical journey from the mines to the steppe is not enough to overcome fears of potent black magic and the troublesome intentions of ninjas. I will suggest that social drinking, with its template for idealised sociality, enables the moral inclusion of ninjas in peaceful herding conviviality.

On the steppe, some people engage in an apparently new practice called ‘fake drinking’ (*hudlaa sogtuu*) whereby guests pretend to be drunk. In the mines I never noticed ninjas visibly involved in this, and when I explicitly enquired about ‘fake drinking’, people usually laughed and asked why someone would ever do such a thing. In the herding areas, however, it is a common practice among those male herders who are also involved in ninja mining.

Since in my experience ‘fake drinking’ visits are relatively uniform in terms of behaviour, speech and social interactions, the following brief description is intended to convey both the conformity of such practices with ordinary drinking situations and the suspicion with which such guests are met. Due to the social expectations of hospitality, it is inconceivable that a host would directly reveal a guest’s pretensions when pretending to be drunk, regardless of the length and extent of the guest’s performance.

When a very drunk man appears, he is welcomed by a woman of the household and takes a seat in the Northern part of the *ger*. As usual, she serves him drinks and snacks, and following the exchange of standard greetings, she patiently attends to his requests. The guest often not only demands the attention of all people present through joking and flirtatious remarks, but may also start crying or singing. As the visitor’s taxing presence increasingly takes over the social space of the *ger*, annoyed members of the household discretely leave. These visits often last hours or even

continue overnight and are seen by the hosting *ail* as a necessary and sometimes entertaining burden that comes with living in the countryside. When gathering outside or in another *ger* during such visits, the household members discuss whether or not the visitor is faking his drunken state. Questions are raised, such as “is his speech consistently slurred?”<sup>16</sup>, “why were his hands suddenly not shaking as much as before?”<sup>17</sup> and “didn’t he manage to get out of the *ger* without help?”<sup>18</sup>. All details of a person’s visit are debated, and if it is decided that the guest is ‘fake drinking’, the residents of the *ail* return to the hosting *ger* to test the visitor with heavy teasing and joking. As I witnessed a couple of times, the visitor’s subsequent anger or laughter will reveal his more sober state if he is indeed ‘faking’ his drunkenness. The ultimate trial for the guest is how well he mounts his horse upon leaving and manages to gallop across the steppe. The household scrutinises his departure, sometimes even with the aid of binoculars. If he is unsteady when far away, the household concludes that the visitor had indeed been a genuine drunk. If the opposite is the case, however, people eagerly discuss the extent to which the guest cleverly managed to conceal his deceit during the visit despite their challenging tests.

In such a scenario, the drunken visitor conforms to the role allocated to him within the accepted template for hospitality on the steppe. By observing the minimal prescriptions regarding appropriate speech, behaviour and interactions between host and guest, the drunken visitor affirms his solid familiarity with the drinking practices of herders. He takes his seat in the right part of the *ger*, accepts drinks in the appropriate way from the host, introduces conversation with the appropriate greetings and demands to be served hospitably by the host. As the visitor takes control of the space of the *ger*, the visitor’s exploitation of local hospitality practices becomes increasingly excessive and approaches an entertaining yet onerous mockery. The primary concern of the hosting household thus becomes to reveal the deceit of the guest and thereby allow his mockery to end their display of hospitality.

In considering the motivations behind the practice of ‘fake drinking’, herders explain that “people pretend to be drunk so that they can hear what the hosting *ail* really says about them”<sup>19</sup>. In situations of presumed genuine drunkenness, the hosting household often whispers comments about the visitor, supposing that he does not notice. They relay comments such as: “I can’t believe he is beating up his wife!”<sup>20</sup> or “did you hear that he went mining yesterday and had all his money

<sup>16</sup> *Tüünii yaria buvtansaar baiv?*

<sup>17</sup> *Yagaad tüünii gar genet salgalahaa boliv?*

<sup>18</sup> *Ter gerees hen negnii tuslaltsaagüigeer garch chadsangüi yuü?*

<sup>19</sup> *Hümüüs sogtson düer esgej honoj büi ailiinhan tednii talaar herhen helehiig sonsoj avdag.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ter avgaigaa zoddog gedegt bi ünendee itgehgüi baina!*

stolen?”<sup>21</sup>. If the hosting household suspects that their visitor is pretending to be drunk, they will loudly exaggerate all the questionable things they imagine this person to have done. By painting a public caricature of the guest, the host thus signals to him that his deceit has been revealed and that his goal of unnoticed eavesdropping will remain unfulfilled.

As ‘fake drinking’ situations place much pressure on the hospitality of herding families, the drunken visitor can also be seen to abuse the power relations involved in visiting. By fervently asserting his position as guest and turning the household into his hosts, the drunken guest establishes himself as a person deserving of attention and respect. Recognising that such power negotiations indeed take place, I suggest that the practice of ‘fake drinking’ has a more profound significance related to the current socio-economic developments in the area. At a time when more and more people from the countryside are simultaneously involved in *ninja* mining and herding, the unfailing approval and trust of other herders becomes ever harder to achieve. I have suggested that these part-time herders/*ninjas* challenge the basis for patriarchal power within household groups by relocating to the mines and cultivating social relationships that allow for individual autonomy. They also transgress fundamental taboos related to the land, ignore cultural meanings surrounding its precious metals and are said to practice a highly potent form of black magic. Moreover, by earning concealable and private wealth they evade the pressures to give generously and position themselves beyond the hierarchies of both kinsmen and local spirits. As such, they seem to act as the very strangers that herders portray them to be. However, I suggest that the stark, mutually exclusive opposition of herders and *ninjas* is an ideological product that is far from supported by the actual social and economic ties that closely link these two distinct physical landscapes. As miners and herders alike travel from the mines to the steppe, they can never entirely shed their dangerous potential and questionable intentionality. Like the *arhichin*, *ninjas* have refused to observe the cultural emphasis placed on the act of giving and are thus always surrounded by much suspicion and fear. As a result, their re-incorporation into herding households and the steppe area in general involves more than their mere physical movement. I suggest that social drinking, in its celebration of joyous and hospitable conviviality, provides a forum that incorporates both *ninjas* and *chötgörs*. Their dangerous potential is momentarily overlooked as they become respected guests to whom the host must submit.

However, given the new practice of ‘fake drinking’, it appears that partaking in regular social drinking is not sufficient to eliminate the dangerous potential of *ninjas*. That is, it is only by

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<sup>21</sup> *Ter öchigdör altny gazar luu yavad hamag möngöö aldsan gedgiig chi duulsan uu?*



*pretending* to be drunk like a herder that fears are suppressed and the guest emerges as anything but a stranger. In chapter two I argued that trickery not only reflects intimate knowledge with the area and its people, but also asserts profound familiarity with local discursive strategies. By successfully interweaving truths and lies, the speaker thus positions him or herself at the very pinnacle of sociality. These capabilities are not only discursive, but are indeed also asserted through physical interactions such as ‘fake drinking’. As guests pretend to be drunk, they display their familiarity with the appropriate drinking practices of herders and the cultural value they place on trickery. In faking their drunken state, they attempt to deceive convincingly, yet provide the hosting household with enough clues as to be considered a moral insider, rather than a stranger living dangerously and foolishly in the mines.

## **Conclusion**

Discussing the ways in which Mongolians judge the intentionality of each other, Owen Lattimore came to the following insights in 1941:

You are in a wide land of scattered people who travel frequently and to great distances. Introductions are uncommon. Their place is taken by a series of set phrases, each of which has a number of allowable variations. These take the place of a direct cross-questioning, which would seem rude; indeed, they are so formal that a few minutes after you have been sonorously assured by a stranger that ‘all is fair and at peace – there is nothing that is strange’ he will be advising you to bear well clear of some place that lies ahead, because of cattle plague or sickness or bandits or whatever it may be. In other words, the purpose of this exchange of questions and answers is not to get at the facts but to find out the truth (...). What you want to know first is whether he is ‘the right sort of man’ or ‘God knows who’. This kind of thing, which is true but relative, rather than factual and absolute, is what you estimate for yourself (Lattimore 1941:184-185).

Independent of the current gold rush in Uyanga that I have described, Mongolians are centrally concerned with uncovering what kind of person a stranger might be. Given ideas about angry spirits, tabooed actions and ‘evil souls’ longing to partake in human life, the quest for discerning a person’s moral standing is seen as crucial to harmonious living. By considering drinking practices as an intrinsic part of daily life, this chapter has shown how an examination of the consumption of alcohol allows for a better understanding of Mongolian ideas about moral personhood at a time of drastic socio-economic change.

On the steppe social drinking is carried out within highly formal and hierarchical relations between host and guest. Prescribed conversation, interaction and physical placement all inform the situation, where the host is expected to display lavish generosity and patient hospitality. Hosting drunken guests places significant strain on the host and also raises fears for the appearance of a *chötgör*. By readily attending to the wishes of guests, the host momentarily suppresses such fears and personal frustration in her attempts to create a joyous environment that celebrates amicable and peaceful sociality. In the mines, however, drinkers evade formal and often gendered host/guest relationships, and social drinking becomes an occasion that asserts the equivalence of difference rather than its hierarchical ranking. Allowing for the relative autonomy of individual drinkers, ninja drinking often appears chaotic and dangerous with its constant fears of adulterated alcohol and ready fist fights.

As social drinking forms a core part of daily life in both the mines and on the steppe, this chapter has suggested that the new practice of ‘fake drinking’ (*hudlaa sogtuu*) is central to the ways in which local ninjas are re-incorporated socially into the herding areas. By pretending to be drunk, the guest shows his intimate familiarity with drinking and the discursive practices of herders, consolidating his standing as a moral insider rather than a dangerous stranger. Whilst much of the recent anthropological literature on drinking has attempted to medicalise drinkers through Western standards of biomedical diagnosis, marking them as socially dysfunctional, I hope to have shown how drinking can be central to and indeed productive of moral conviviality.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### Introduction

It was late January and my hosts were soon to celebrate *Tsagaan Sar*. Months had been spent preparing the event. More than a thousand *buuz* were made, beautiful silk *deels* sewn, and every corner of the *ger* cleaned and repaired. My sisters and I looked through the jewellery case in an attempt to decide what to wear on the first evening of the nearly month-long celebration. The case was full of fake silver necklaces, bracelets and earrings decorated with gem-like stones of all colours. However, upon realising that I do not wear earrings, my sisters exclaimed: “But, why don’t you wear earrings? All women do! Look at mum”. My host mother wore gold earrings of simple craftsmanship, containing no fake metal or colourful stones. Upon remarking that I found her earrings beautiful, my oldest sister immediately replied: “Yes, but you can’t have earrings like hers. They are too heavy (*hüüd*) for you”. On different occasions, many local herders had explained that these earrings were made of pure gold (*shijer alt*) and thus too ‘dangerous’ (*ayultai*) for young women. They had explained that gold could attract (*tatah*) young women, making us forget about our herd and desire nothing but gold<sup>1</sup>. After having children, however, we would slowly become less vulnerable (*emzeg*) and gold would finally no longer be able to attract us. At that stage, gold would not be dangerous, but just pretty.

In this book I have discussed how gold is a particular kind of metal, surrounded by elaborate ideas and extensive taboos in Mongolia. It has unmatched power (*altny chadvar*) that can be used in black magic to inflict illness and even death. It is associated historically with imperial authority and the spiritual order of the cosmos. Given its weight and potency, the precious metal is best avoided by young women. When sold to others, gold gives rise to polluted money (*buzartai möngö*) that is best isolated from certain economic circuits. Rather than singling out the materiality of gold in approaching such cultural meanings, I have argued for the importance of considering material culture within a perspective that also acknowledges the history of gold and its current ‘social life’ (Appadurai 1986). Although gold is chemically the least transformable substance of all minerals,

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<sup>1</sup> The view that gold, and wealth more generally, can blind people from everyday matters and turn their lives into an endless pursuit for material gain is common cross-culturally. Within Christianity, for example, the worship of Mammon (the ‘false god’ of avarice and worldly gain) entails an ignorance, if not hatred, of God, leading people astray from their spiritual devotion and human compassion (see Luke 16:11, 13 in The New Testament 2005). Such worship is exemplified in the Biblical narrative of the Golden Calf (see “Moses on Sinai”, Exodus 19-34 in The Old Testament 1996).

this book has shown how it is centrally implicated in changing social, economic and spiritual-religious relations on the Mongolian steppe. Indeed, gold has effected major transformations far beyond the Inner Asian plains. Consider, for example, the famous gold rushes in North America, the colonial desires for precious metals in South America, the wars fought over gold mining claims in South Africa, the Roman pursuit of Welsh gold; each continent has its own history of ‘gold fever’; a phenomenon that continues today in many countries around the world. In this concluding chapter I will therefore raise the broader question of what it is about gold and gold mining that historically and seemingly universally has such transformative and often transgressive potential. Before situating Mongolian ninja mining within this larger comparative framework, I will first attempt to provide a synthesis of the main arguments presented in the book regarding the Mongolian ‘gold rush’.

### **The dangers and attraction of ninja mining**

At present, thousands of people are mining for gold in Uyanga under harsh and dangerous conditions. Since many ninjas come from local herding households, this book has sought to explain why herders seek to the mines and how such involvement is conceptualised within local cosmology. Although ninja mining is commonly depicted as a ‘poverty phenomenon’ by international development agencies and others (see Introduction), local ninjas come from both poor and wealthy herding backgrounds. Given the local view that money earned from gold mining is best spent on non-enduring objects, it is clear that ninja mining constitutes an economic practice that differs fundamentally from that of herding with its long-term wealth production. Also, as people fear that such money remains ‘polluted’ even after its ritual cleansing, the circulation of ninja wealth emphasises the strenuous reproduction of social relations across economic sectors. As a result, involvement in ninja mining has implications far beyond the practical generation of a monetary income. Whilst ninjas surely desire the financial rewards of gold mining, I argue that their involvement in mining is centrally related to the possibility of earning a form of wealth that is radically different from that of the steppe. That is, in addition to forming an alternative subsistence economy, I have demonstrated how ninja mining also allows for participation in new social and spiritual-religious relations.

As local herders live within patriarchal household groups, wealth and authority are ultimately in the hands of the male household head. Whereas wealth may be divided and allocated during the lifetime of the patriarch, authority in Uyanga is only passed on to the oldest son upon the death of his father. As a result, it is almost exclusively the patriarch who is able to assert uninhibited

individual autonomy within herding households. However, the in-marrying daughter-in-law, with a dowry that remains her own and a delicate role vis-à-vis local spirits, is also able to achieve a significant measure of independence. I thus argue that the daughter-in-law provides an immediate model of achieving autonomy for junior members of herding households. In moving away from the steppe and taking up ninja mining, local herders can therefore be seen to take up a social position of autonomy similar to that of herding patriarchs.

By earning a monetary income that is largely unpredictable to outsiders, ninjas are able to hide their wealth from others and thus evade the expectations of generosity that permeate life on the steppe. Moreover, by working and living with friends rather than kinsmen, social relations are at least temporarily freed from the relative status positions of an extensive kin hierarchy. Ninjas thus seek a form of wealth that enables them to distance themselves from the hierarchy of kinsmen and its implied obligations. However, I argue that, in moving to the mines, ninjas distance themselves not only from kinsmen, but also from the spirits of the steppe. Transgressing fundamental taboos related to the land and worshipping the new black spirits of the mines, ninjas manifest the individual, rather than the household group, as the locus of human-spirit relations. By severing relations of hierarchy, ninjas sustain primarily those social and spiritual-religious ties that allow for autonomy. Yet, given the ninjas' feared reputation for practising potent black magic, herders readily grant ninjas their independence. Regardless of the actual wishes of individual ninjas, the new spiritual landscape of the mines thus contributes to the generation of their relative autonomy.

This strong association between the new black spirits and autonomy is rooted, I have suggested, in local ideas about mining and about gold. Whereas gold is generally too 'heavy' for people to withstand, miners expose themselves willingly to such dangers and pursue their individualising greed for the precious metal. However, not all humans are equally vulnerable. As women mature, have children and become firmly grounded within their husbands' household groups, they become less vulnerable to the attraction of gold. That is, whilst gold is always potent, human capabilities to withstand its weight changes with processes of kinship and the reproduction of patriarchy. In this sense, ninja mining can be seen not so much as a 'poverty phenomenon', but rather as an attempt to generate autonomy beyond the patriarchal household groups of the steppe. Mining for gold, more than any other economic activity, thus appears ideal to this pursuit.

Herders express much concern about ninja mining, complaining that the social, cosmological and ecological practices of ninjas are in conflict or even incompatible with the herding traditions of Mongolia. Such views are shared by many scholars across disciplines. However, through my

analysis of wealth and patriarchy in the Mongolian informal gold mining economy, I suggest that ninja mining not only co-exists with, but has indeed become an integral part of the herding economy in Uyanga. Firstly, when people earn ‘polluted money’ (*buzartai möngö*) and attempt to convert or consume it, their actions reinforce the view that the two economic sectors are distinct. Rather than circumventing the system, ninjas can thus be seen to reproduce its boundaries<sup>2</sup>. As long as money earned from mining is considered ‘polluted’, or in other ways marked as different from other money, ninja mining can only ever become an auxiliary economy to herding – not its replacement. Secondly, when herders leave for the mines in search of friendship, money and individual autonomy, their temporary migration can be seen as a momentary dissociation that ultimately helps reproduce the patriarchal herding economy. Since life on the steppe does not allow for the positionality sought by ninjas, their stay in the mines counterbalances the strict herding hierarchy without contesting its overall structure. Indeed, the physical proximity of herding and mining may, I suggest, even reinforce patriarchal structures as herders returning from the mines aspire to become part of the hierarchy they left behind. Although herding and mining may at first appear to be at odds, it is the differences between their distinct forms of social organisation that can be seen to contribute to the reproduction of a particularly conservative form of patriarchy in Uyanga today. However, this symbiotic relationship is rather precarious and challenges the extent to which spirits and humans are capable of (or willing to) re-incorporate ninjas, ‘evil souls’ (*chötgörs*) and other dangerous entities into their households. Whilst the new practice of ‘fake drinking’ (*hudlaa sogtuu*) currently enables such an accommodation, it is uncertain how long it will be capable of doing so. That is, how much pressure can hospitality and expected generosity withstand before it collapses and surrenders to acts of taking rather than giving? My guess is that if the ecological consequences of mining render herding downriver near impossible, the autonomy of ninjas will then become as permanent as the scarred landscape within which they embarked upon their pursuit.

## Gold fever

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, it is not only in Mongolia that gold mining is closely linked to drastic socio-economic changes. While the substantial economic impacts of gold mining may appear self-evident, the recurring emergence of a ‘gold rush culture’ may be less so. To conclude, I will therefore discuss gold rushes across centuries and continents in order to understand better the social significance of gold cross-culturally.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Akin (1999) for a similar argument regarding cash and shell currencies among the Kwaio of the Solomon Islands.

As opposed to other metals, gold has historically been directly convertible to many state currencies following the introduction of the gold standard<sup>3</sup>. As a result, gold mining has allowed miners to reap the yields of their labour with a minimum degree of exchange mediation. Whereas a peasant must sell his goods before receiving earnings, a gold miner could historically use gold as an immediate currency in transactions<sup>4</sup>. Given the widespread recognition of gold as a standard medium of exchange, it is perhaps not surprising that gold and gold mining has often revealed extreme sides of the human character<sup>5</sup>. Also, at a societal level, the unearthing of the precious metal, and its entry into national and international circulation, has had major macro-economic impacts on particular countries. The release of wealth, whether produced and circulated formally or informally, affects both the human and material infrastructure of a country. Moreover, even prior to the uncovering of riches, gold mining is closely linked to societal transformations. Since the price of gold on the world market fluctuates closely in relation to national crises such as wars, looting and bank failures, significant society-wide ruptures can be seen as intrinsically related to the monetary value of gold<sup>6</sup>. For example, without past social, political and economic disasters, the gold price might never have climbed as high as it is today. In this sense, it is possible to see gold mining as a reaction to surging gold prices, which are in turn a reaction to emerging national crises.

Whilst such macro-economic considerations may help explain the growth and decline of national mining sectors and their impact on societies more generally, it concurrently reduces all gold miners to uniform maximisers of profit. However, as this book has demonstrated, such wealth production is not necessarily the only or even primary reason behind people's involvement in a gold rush. In this section I will therefore consider why certain kinds of sociality tend to develop among gold miners cross-culturally.

In his detailed study of Brazilian gold mining, David Cleary (1990) describes how informal sector gold mining emerged in the late eighteenth century in reaction to the intensification of cotton and sugar production on plantations run by colonial landlords. Confronted with harsh and exploitative

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<sup>3</sup> The gold standard is a monetary system in which the standard economic unit is a fixed weight of gold. When the UK adopted the gold standard in 1717, £1 was deemed equal to 7.32 grams of gold (Eichengreen and Flandreau 1997:4). Following severe economic crises during the Cold War era, particularly in the US where military and social programmes required more money to be printed, the gold standard was eventually terminated in the 1970s.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the implications of gold as a standard medium of exchange for the attempted administration of the early Soviet gold rush (Littlepage and Demaree 1939).

<sup>5</sup> Marx, for example, discusses how the correlation between gold and its use-value as a medium of exchange leads capitalist mine owners to exploit workers more than in any other economic activity (Marx 1976 [1867]:226).

<sup>6</sup> This is of course not unique for the gold price, but indeed applies to most valuable minerals and commodities. The case of oil seems only too poignant an example.

work conditions, communities of runaway slaves fled to the jungle and began mining for gold (ibid.:27). By exchanging gold with river traders, miners acquired objects such as guns and defended themselves against the Portuguese colonial authorities. As the miners continued to guard their territory and trade their riches, gold mining began “as an option for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy” (ibid.:50).

In 1979 a gold rush broke out and men of all ages from throughout Brazil came to mine for gold in the Amazon. Using equipment that was far more developed and varied than that used in Uyanga, the occupational hierarchy in Brazil was extensive and explicit. Despite technological specialisation and economic differentiation, Cleary argues that the structure of the mining was based on “a strongly held ethic of autonomy and freedom of action” (ibid.:230) among poor as well as rich miners. Although people possessed different means, their economic standing did not translate into authority. While the ‘owner’ of a mining area could use physical force to assert his power, workers could always leave the work team and become part of another. Whereas mining required that people work collectively, its informal organisation ensured the independence and autonomy of all workers involved.

According to Cleary, the gold rush in Brazil enabled people to escape their once precarious positions in rural and urban economies and seek personal freedom from a society based on restricting social and racial classes (ibid.:75). Ever since the refugee slaves fled from plantations in the eighteenth century, informal sector gold mining in Brazil has been central to people’s quest for independence. Over the course of the long and often exploitative history of gold mining in Columbia, Taussig (2004) similarly identifies freedom and independence as a key feature of mining during the short period in which it was informally organised. As miners panned for gold in streams and collected their own earnings, economic and social independence from the state and other trans-local institutions became possible. Indeed, given the simple mining technique, people worked individually and were not forced to rely on others for their livelihood. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a French mining company active in the region prohibited informal sector mining precisely “because it gave people a measure of independence” (ibid.:3). Although mining for gold has the potential to inspire and facilitate quests for social, economic and political freedom, Taussig argues that this is rarely actually the case. He suggests that the fetishization of gold blinds people from recognising the exploitative relations that are usually part of its production. Miners enter into



pacts with the Devil in order to obtain more gold<sup>7</sup>, which is then sold to consumers who adorn themselves with the ‘congealed miasmic’ metal (ibid.:253). As a result, the potential of gold to spur its seekers into quests for independence is, in Taussig’s view, either highly rare or, more commonly, an example of the enthralling power of false consciousness. Taussig insists that, given the political economy of gold mining, independence more commonly exists as an ideology of liberation, not as a material reality achieved by most miners. In his view, whether or not miners are involved in formal or informal sector practices, gold tends to have such a hold over the human imagination that it often leads to exploitation.

Rather than seeing exploitation as an intrinsic and unchanging reality of gold mining, the classical gold rushes of the United States illustrate how such labour relations emerge over time. When gold was first discovered in California in 1848, more than one million people came to the gold fields in search of the rumoured wealth. Discovering on average more than twenty dollars worth of gold per day, at a time when skilled artisans earned 1.50 USD for twelve hours of work (Rawls 1999:7), the gold rush in California grew quickly and attracted people from across the world. In the initial years of the gold rush, “the mining frontier made for a real equality of fortune”, where “the free miner remained, at least until 1873 or later, the foundation of the whole system” (McWilliams 1949:28-29). The pioneering American miner was not necessarily a reactionary character who escaped exploitation and repression, as Cleary argued was the case in the Brazilian gold rush. Rather, the California gold rush promised opportunities and experiences that were in accord with American society. “The event represented an image of instant success available through hard work; an affirmation of democratic beliefs under which wealth would be available to all” (Cornford 1999:83). Freedom and independence seemed to not only capture people’s imagination, but also to form part of the reality of the early gold rush<sup>8</sup>.

However, in contrast to the popular image of the solitary prospector, gold miners were forced to labour together relatively early on in the California gold rush. As the number of miners outpaced the number of claims, and as the technology and capital needed to work the areas exceeded the resources of individual miners, people soon joined temporary associations and corporate entities

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<sup>7</sup> In his earlier book, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Taussig 1980), Taussig views the worship of El Tío as a form of class consciousness and resistance against capitalist relations of production. While Taussig predicts that the devil worship will culminate in political action, the argument advanced in *My Cocaine Museum* (Taussig 2004) is much more sceptical and far-reaching, incorporating miners, traders and consumers in the fetishization of gold (and cocaine).

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that there was much xenophobia and violence in the gold fields. Moreover, forms of ‘taxation’ and large monthly ‘fees’ were imposed on miners who were not citizens of the United States. As a result, more than

(Jung 1999:58). With the steady decline in the economic position of most miners, the exploitation described by Taussig became an increasingly common phenomenon in the gold fields. Those who prospered in the gold rush were thus “entrepreneurs who learned well the axiom that the main chance for success lay not in mining gold but in mining the miners” (Rawls 1999:7).

In succumbing to the gold fever and joining the masses, miners in historical and contemporary gold rushes appear to share a common ethos of autonomy and independence. Although the independence sought by runaway slaves in Brazil in the eighteenth century, miners in California in the nineteenth century, and Mongolian ninjas today may appear entirely dissimilar, such immediate diversity should not prevent us from seeking to understand that which is shared. While autonomy is expressed in various and culturally-specific ways, I suggest that a ‘gold rush culture’ is facilitated by the common informal economic structure, the relative absence of political authority and the imaginative potential of gold to produce wealth. In seeking to the gold fields, miners cross-culturally access a form of wealth creation that is grounded in the presumption of quintessentially free labour relations. In the absence of bosses and owners with recognised political and economic power, miners are free to explore the extent to which gold can indeed transform their lives, away from plantation owners, restrictive labour relations or patriarchal kinsmen.

However, as both Taussig and herders in Uyanga warn us, gold is a particular kind of metal that can exert a powerful hold over the human imagination. Attracted to the fetishized object, miners may willingly or unknowingly expose themselves to dangerous relations in their quest for independence. Faced with angry spirits, constant violence and potentially fatal drinking, ninjas are constantly reminded of the dangers involved in their pursuit of gold. I suggest that this delicate balance reflects the difficulty, if not impossibility, of realising individual autonomy. Whereas informal sector gold mining may readily enable miners to achieve economic and political independence, individual autonomy is a different measure altogether.

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10’000 Mexican miners left California in 1850 (Cornford 1999:86). ‘Freedom’ was thus not a reality for all miners in the early California gold rush.

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