NOMADIC CULTURE AND FAIR TRADE: ETHICS IN SUSTAINABLE CASHMERE STANDARDS

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In recent decades, the fair trade movement has contributed to building consumer awareness of social justice concerns within global commodity chains (Stenn 2013). At the same time, some ethnographic studies of fair trade producer groups have raised concerns about conflicts between the ethical principles captured within fair trade certifications and the priorities of producers themselves (Lyon and Moberg 2010; Fisher 2018; Luetchford 2008; Sen 2017). Insofar as fair trade certifications aim to provide clear, measurable, and universal indicators of social justice and inclusion, they can be said to apply a deontological approach to ethics – that is, an ethical framework grounded in the logic of universal rules. While this approach brings advantages of legibility and universal applicability, in a way that is comparable to rights-based approaches to development, it also has the potential to exclude and undermine alternative ethical perspectives embedded within the cultures of fair trade producers.

In the context of our research on cashmere production in Mongolia, we have sought to expose specific, local ways that nomadic herders frame ethics and sustainability. Our interviews with herders suggest that that nomadic producers often overtly privilege a virtue ethics that celebrates values such as care and prosperity, while simultaneously taking guidance from a deontological ethical structure of normative rules and taboos, known as *tseerlekh yos* (Punsag and Lonjid 2003). These findings lead us to ask: to what extent can fair trade accommodate diverse ethical understandings, such as those espoused by Mongolian cashmere producers? Using a decolonial lens, how might we promote respect for cultural and ethical diversity through fair trade – instead of imposing a universalizing ethics directed by the consumer in the Global North – while still

maintaining a common-ground understanding of what makes trade "fair"?

An ethical pluralist approach to fair trade requires a commitment to ongoing, intersubjective discourse on ethically complex issues, rather than claims of universal consensus (Dolan 2020; Reinecke and Ansari 2015). Consequently, my goal in this paper is to present possibilities for the design of fair trade mechanisms that accommodate values pluralism, commenting on examples of ethical conflicts and challenges associated with nomadic culture and its safeguarding. I consider two potential models for ethical pluralism in cashmere value chains: (1) a fair trade framework that encompasses cultural rights, as part of a deontological ethics, aligned with ideas of "Outstanding Universal Value" in the work of UNESCO World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage institutions; and (2) a set of commitments and institutions to promote inclusive metaethical discourse through fair trade networks, designed to expose and negotiate conflict between incommensurable values held by diverse actors within the commodity chain. Whereas the cultural rights-based approach may be more effective in mobilizing consumers and other commodity chain actors, and is compatible with existing fair trade network designs, it offers limited potential to address power difference and value pluralism. Conversely, the discursive approach to fair trade provides limited normative guidance, but offers openings for ethnographically grounded critique that may draw consumers into a meaningful awareness of cross-cultural ethics.

CULTURE IN CASHMERE SUSTAINABILITY STANDARDS

This essay is a reflection on some findings from an ethnographic research project I have been conducting in partnership with the International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilizations under the auspices of UNESCO, focusing on ethics and sustainability in Mongolia's cashmere value chain, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Our team inquired about local perspectives on cashmere production and sustainability through 70 semi-structured interviews with cashmere producers and traders, conducted in Arkhangai, Bayankhongor, and Ömnögovi provinces in 2022. Building on ideas we have explored previously (Thrift 2023), the commentary I present here takes inspiration from some of the themes suggested by our interviews, contrasting the cultural priorities

articulated by some herders to the ethical positions outlined in published standards on sustainable cashmere, and proposes some practical options for addressing culture within fair trade cashmere initiatives.

Cashmere is Mongolia's only major renewable resource-based export commodity, accounting for 3.6% of all commodity exports from the country by value (Mongolian Customs Agency 2024). But in recent years, Mongolian cashmere has also been linked to unsustainable production practices, reflecting claims in both academic literature and popular media that cashmere goats have been contributing to rangeland degradation, wildlife loss, and desertification (Berger, Buuveibaatar, and Mishra 2013; Dorj et al. 2013; Dalton 2019; Ferry 2017; Davis 2020). Calls for consumers and brands to avoid Mongolian cashmere come as the global fashion industry falls under increasing scrutiny due to its negative social and environmental impacts. Worldwide, apparel production has been identified as a major source of waste and microplastics pollution; it generates close to 10% of global carbon emissions, and it is the second-largest consumer of water in the world (Niinimäki et al. 2020). The fashion industry has additionally been associated with exploitative and unsafe labour conditions, prompting inclusion of workplace safety measures within sustainability initiatives such as those recognized by the United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (Meier 2021).

Various standards and certification schemes have been introduced to address these concerns, including no fewer than three sustainable cashmere labelling initiatives in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. These cashmere standards include the Good Cashmere Standard introduced in Inner Mongolia by the Aid by Trade Foundation (ABTF); the Cashmere Standard managed by the Sustainable Fibre Alliance (SFA) with industry partners in Mongolia; and the Sustainable Cashmere Certification from Agronomes et Vétérinaires Sans Frontières (AVSF), operating through the Sustainable Cashmere Union in Bayankhongor, Arkhangai, and Khentii provinces of Mongolia (Aid by Trade Foundation 2024; Sustainable Fibre Alliance 2024; AVSF 2020). Each of these schemes follows the model typically adopted in fair trade or organic commodity labelling initiatives, whereby producers are held to a set of standards created by an international certifying organization, administered through mechanisms of self-reporting and audits.

While sustainable cashmere certification initiatives have effectively drawn attention (and financial resources) to sustainable development issues affecting Mongolian herders, they also rely on an assumption of shared values among producers, consumers, and the institutional partners of the labelling organization. Nonetheless, not all priorities are necessarily given equal weight. For nomadic producers in Mongolia, we find that safeguarding the "nomadic culture" is reported as an important concern, on the grounds that the body of traditional knowledge and practices organized around mobility underpins herders' social well-being and sovereignty. Yet sustainable cashmere standards devote minimal attention to cultural factors, instead emphasizing technical "improvements" that, in many cases, deliberately transform established herding practices. The ABTF Good Cashmere Standard, for example, requires herders to ensure that cashmere is extracted with goats restrained using ropes of soft material, without tethering to any external structure, in a standing position, and ideally using a method of shearing with electric clippers rather than combing manually (Criterion 4.3). These techniques contrast to the traditional practices of combing goats and shearing sheep by hand, flat against the ground. Cultural factors are explicitly acknowledged only once in this standard, in a section addressing child labour (Criterion 6.1), which states that children under the age of twelve are forbidden from performing work duties with the exception that they are allowed to take part in traditional tasks "undertaken for the purpose of transmitting the family's or the local culture".

The child labour criterion, in acknowledging the overlap between work and traditional culture, is fundamentally intended to protect children from hazardous or exploitative labour conditions in alignment with ILO Conventions 138 and 182 (International Labour Organization 1973; 1999). Yet it may nonetheless be challenged as imposing a colonial distinction between "work" and "culture", one that effectively limits the economic value that may be associated with culturally important activities. The criterion also embodies several broader ethical expectations, in the sense of being predicated on claims about what is right or just: first, that it is desirable to draw a firm demarcation between "work" and "non-work" activities within the household economy; second, that school-based learning should be privileged over traditional learning in the home; and third, that

young children (under the age of 13) should be excluded from most if not all forms of work. This and similar criteria propose a normative differentiation of the social collective into the structurally distinct spheres of work, household, and school, thereby undermining the legitimacy of non-formal learning in "home" or "work" settings – contexts that may be considered essential to the sustainable, intergenerational transmission of culture and knowledge among nomadic people (Krätli and Dyer 2009; Dyer 2012; Yembuu 2021). The provisions also embody a fourth, more general assumption that children and animal welfare are best assured by defining appropriate means of prevention – that is, by excluding actions considered harmful – rather than through positive means of building well-being, as promoted through efforts to recognize Indigenous cultural perspectives within well-being and sustainability measures (Dalziel, Saunders, and Savage 2019; Dockery 2010).

As the above example illustrates, standards aiming to ensure ethical and sustainable cashmere production are guided by ethical assumptions that are not necessarily universal, as they may run against alternative ethical priorities and reasonings. Normative ethical theories – that is, approaches to determining an ethical course of action – are in fact quite diverse, encompassing *consequentialism*, an approach that calls for choices that maximize positive outcomes in a given situation; *virtue ethics*, which calls for good moral habits such as truthfulness and generosity; and *deontological* or *duty-based ethics*, which calls for choices that follow rules of right and wrong.

APPROACHES TO CULTURE AND FAIR TRADE CASHMERE

Fair trade standards are closely aligned with the deontological approach, as they articulate rules for ethical trade that should apply to any situation, anywhere in the world. According to the three certification standards introduced above, it is always wrong to exploit natural resources unsustainably, to subject children to forced labour, or to injure animals: these universal rules always must apply in every setting. If principles such as animal welfare and human rights are viewed as universal and inviolable, they will tend to outrank goals such as the safeguarding of traditional culture, which will be considered "desirable" rather than "essential".

Rights-based approaches to development are championed as bringing engagement with the state, calls for democratic accountability, and repoliticization of development (Gready 2008; Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi 2004). Taking inspiration from the human rights-based approach that guides many development initiatives, while acknowledging the relatively low importance assigned to culture, well-being, and sovereignty in existing cashmere standards, I propose the desirability of incorporating the concept of cultural rights within fair trade certifications. To take a baseline, cultural rights are articulated in two major Indigenous rights instruments, ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), both of which call for state-level protections of traditional practices and land use, a duty to seek consent prior to development initiatives that could impact Indigenous communities, and recognition of self-determination (International Labour Organization 1989; UN 2007). ILO 169, for example, calls for recognition and protection for "social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices" and respect for "integrity of the values, practices and institutions" (Article 5); the right to consultation; and self-determination in matters of "economic, social and cultural development" (Article 7). ILO 169 also calls for "social, spiritual, cultural and environmental impact" studies prior to undertaking development projects (Article 7), and asserts that traditional activities are "important factors in the maintenance of their cultures and in their economic self-reliance and development" (Article 23).

This set of rights and obligations, while formulated in these two instruments as obligations for the state in relation to minority Indigenous communities, provides a useful starting framework for evaluating the ethics of a trade initiative in cultural terms. Asserting that a "fair trade" cashmere value chain supports *cultural rights* could be taken to mean that the value chain actively includes small-scale, mobile herders who keep diversified herds. This would signal that value chain actors do not promote more specialized, more sedentary, or more industrialized forms of production – such as intensive cashmere goat farming – which could threaten traditional, nomadic production systems over the longer term, recognizing the experience of sedentarized herders in Inner Mongolia under Chinese state policy (Jacobs 2015). While conventional markets reward the cost efficiencies of specialized production, fair trade typically includes a

price premium that acts as a subsidy for producers, to support community well-being in areas chosen by producer organizations (Fairtrade International 2024), that can serve as a mechanism to capture the cultural sustainability value associated with traditional, mixed, and diverse economies. Additionally, as herders in many parts of Mongolia are frustrated by their political weakness in dealing with large-scale land users – notably mines, who compete with them for resource use (Burchard-Dziubińska and Myagmarjav 2019; Sternberg 2008; Upton 2016) – a fair trade network might also operate as a political advocacy mechanism to demand due consultation and local participation in local development projects, as stipulated by ILO 169 and UNDRIP.

A separate model for deontological ethics and culture is available through the concept of "Outstanding Universal Value" (OUV), as applied by UNESCO in its designation of World Heritage Sites. UNESCO uses this term to describe natural or cultural properties whose significance is "so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity" (UNESCO World Heritage Committee 2008 Article 49). Viewed through a deontological ethics lens, OUV can be described as asserting an ethical imperative to protect important cultural properties, regardless of where they are located or whose cultural tradition they belong to.

While a critically nuanced view of OUV will acknowledge the colonial nature of claims that Indigenous communities' cultural property "belongs to everyone" (Pocock and Lilley 2017), pragmatically the category *cultural heritage* has been deployed by states and their institutions as a nation-building mechanism, serving to justify the existence of a sovereign nation-state through the narrative of its possession of a cultural heritage whose value is literally "outstanding" and "universal", or – in the case of intangible cultural heritage – asserting a national "patent" on a traditional practice (Aykan 2015). In the case of Mongolia, such heritage is framed to a large degree as "nomadic culture", and supported by several tiers of lists of culturally significant sites and practices at the level of each administrative jurisdiction. Importantly, within Mongolia's national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage lists, there are approximately thirty identified elements whose existence is directly tied to the survival of nomadic livestock production (Mongolia, Minister of Education,

Culture, Science, and Sport 2019). Drawing on this list as an indicative inventory of elements that are safeguarded within a "culturally sustainable" cashmere production system, a fair trade label or standard might do two things. First, the certification could require investment in activities that can have a meaningful impact on the protection and development of listed cultural elements, similar to the way in which cashmere sustainability certifications have already included commitments to fund rangeland management initiatives. Second, it could require a commitment from affiliated brands to the promotion of cultural properties recognized by sovereign governance institutions in producer communities. While a minority of cashmere labels and vendors refer to nomadic culture in a general or exoticizing manner in their marketing messages (e.g., Born of Nomad Cashmere 2020; Loro Piana 2020), we have not identified significant and systematic use of marketing platforms to communicate the specific cultural practices that the cashmere trade actually supports.

Whereas the *deontological* approach to fair trade focuses on universal rules and standards, a *metaethical* approach would involve discourse on what it means to be "ethical" in the value chain. Our discussions with Mongolian cashmere producers indicate that there may be agreement among producers and consumers on general ethical principles, but disagreement on how to prioritize them. In the language of ethical theory, we can consider values *incommensurable* if there is no way to qualify them according to a common measure, and *incomparable* if there is no way of choosing between them (Andersson and Herlitz 2021; Mair and Evans 2015). To appreciate the problem of incommensurability, we might consider different claims about animal welfare that are impossible to evaluate according to a shared index. While we could agree on avoiding harm to livestock as a broadly shared goal, does that mean that combing goats is unethical, as PETA has claimed in its campaign targeting the cashmere sector (Waz 2019)? Is slaughtering goats at the end of their productive lives unethical? Is the use of animal-based fibres unethical, as a vegan would assert? Or, as some Mongolian herders have claimed to us, is industrial farm production of livestock unethical, in contrast to what might be perceived as a respectful system of human-animal co-dependence?

In the case of incomparability, we can consider the impossibility of comparing incompatible practices such as veganism and nomadic

pastoralism, or goals such as environmental protection and economic development. A value chain actor privileging environmental sustainability might avoid virgin cashmere altogether, as designers such as Stella McCartney have already done (Stella McCartney 2022); meanwhile, an actor privileging sustainable livelihoods would endeavour to provide greater incomes to herders, as Mongolia has attempted, by increasing the value of the cashmere they produce (Government of Mongolia 2020). Although we might agree to the proposition that cashmere production has contributed to land degradation, mining can be much worse, as cashmere-producing herders sometimes emphasize. From this perspective, would it be ethically preferable to use less land for textile production by using intensively-cultivated organic cotton, or to preserve biodiversity by using fibres from animals grazed on natural grasslands, as suggested by proponents of "regenerative wool" (Hashempour 2023; Fibershed 2024)?

Acknowledging the ethical complexity of these situations requires us to look beyond the strict rules of a deontological approach. A fair trade network motivated by metaethical discourse, following the "ethics as sensemaking" approach proposed by Reinecke and Ansari (2015), might emphasize the messiness of everyday ethical decision-making, and draw focus to the standpoints and experiences that are concealed by reductive rulesets. Such a network could support the transparent sharing of information along the value chain, recognizing the ethical concerns experienced and raised by different actors, from herders to end consumers. Alternatively, the fair trade organization might play an active role in funding or coordinating knowledge production in the form of studies, conferences, focus groups, and the like, so that stakeholders are able to make more informed ethical decisions and analysis.

CONCLUSION

The deontological cultural rights-based or "universal value" approach is compatible with existing fair trade network designs, as it is relatively straightforward to add new cultural criteria or indicators to standards and certification schemes. Framing criteria as universal, inviolable rights can effective in mobilizing consumers and other commodity chain actors to take action against perceived violations. But this approach offers limited potential to address power difference

and value pluralism, such as competing understandings of animal welfare. In a trade system in which producers and consumers hold incommensurable values, the downstream actors' values may have greater power.

Conversely, the discursive/metaethical approach to fair trade provides limited normative guidance, but offers openings for ethnographically grounded critique that may draw consumers into a meaningful awareness of cross-cultural ethics. Building and sharing knowledge of cashmere value chains can support nuanced critique of inequality and injustice, including unsustainable practices, in the place of reductive claims and generalizations. Most consumers are almost certainly unwilling to conduct detailed technical investigations into the sourcing of each product they purchase, but may be interested in commodities that have stories behind them. In this sense, collecting stories by different actors in the value chain can be of greater value than managing environmental accounting databases and algorithms as part of certification schemes.

The suggestions I have presented here are not intended as normative solutions to the problem of designing an ethical and sustainable cashmere value chain, but instead reflect the goal of bringing an anthropological critique to the ethics of cashmere production. There is a strong appeal to cashmere certifications that embrace simple, legible, and measurable indicators. From a critical perspective, however, it is clear that such instruments still leave room to address the "messy" ethics of cashmere production as it plays out in the everyday lives of producers, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. Moving beyond the certainty of rules and audits, fair trade mechanisms can endeavour to promote meaningful, cross-cultural understanding of the ethics of cashmere by engaging actors across the value chain, and by taking their incommensurable and incomparable ethical positions seriously. As a starting point, we can begin by interpreting the normative rules that have already been set out, bringing nomadic culture into the mix.

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