

THE TRANS-ALTAI TORGUT AND BULGAN AFTER FORTY YEARS

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In 1975, the Polish-Mongolian Ethnographic Expedition, which had been in existence for quite a few years, decided to start fieldwork among the Torgut on the territory of Bulgan *sum* in Khovd *aimag*. The Torgut of Bulgan *sum* were part of a larger and more differentiated community of the Trans-Altai Torgut who were separated by a state border from the Torgut living in China, or to be more precise, in Xinjiang. They still remember their origins, common ancestors and kinship connections with the Torgut of Xinjiang. In 2012, fieldwork among the Bulgan Torgut was renewed. After thirty seven years we returned to the old idea, which appeared to be all the more interesting as, over the years, there have been some very important changes in that region. They are the consequence of dynamic political changes in Mongolia itself that began in the 1990s, but also of those that started taking place in China around the same time. When we conducted our first fieldwork, the basis of Bulgan's economy were flocks of sheep, herds, and animal breeding, the five main breeding species in Mongolia being: camels, horses, cattle (including yaks and their crosses with domestic cattle), sheep and goats.

This peripheral nature of Bulgan helped to encourage certain changes, which we observed during our fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, that made it possible for both the inhabitants of Bulgan and those of Takashiken on the Chinese side of the border to move backwards and forwards more freely. The ease in which profit could be made from trade was the main attraction, which in turn had a detrimental effect on the breeding of animals. A general trend is also to give their animals into the care of a relative, paying him to look after them in order to have more time for their trading activities. Trade thus means a quick income and this provides additional encouragement to give up breeding animals.

When defining one's own ethnic identity, the importance of the presence of "others" – especially if negative stereotypes are linked with their image – has been a well-known fact to anthropologists for a long time. This can be observed through their dislike for many Chinese products, their fear of the Chinese nation and of their dominance, which only strengthens Torgut solidarity. As such, the thesis that they fulfil an essential role in building Torgut ethnic identity is a valid.

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W roku 1975 działająca od kilkunastu lat Polsko-Mongolska Ekspedycja Etnograficzna postanowiła podjąć prace pośród Torgutów na terenie *sum* Bulgan, *Aimag* Khovd. Torguci *sumu* Bulgan stanowią część licznej i zróżnicowanej zbiorowości Torgutów zaaltajskich; oddzieleni granicą państwową od Torgutów żyjących na terenie Chin, a dokładniej na obszarze Sinciang. Pamięć pochodzenia, wspólnych przodków i związków rodowych z Torgutami Sinciang, zachowała się u nich do dzisiaj.

W roku 2012 podjęte zostały ponownie badania pośród bulgańskich Torgutów. Po 37 latach powróciliśmy do dawnej idei; tym bardziej wydaje się to interesujące, że na przestrzeni lat, jakie minęły od

poprzednich badań, dokonały się w tym rejonie niezmiernie istotne przemiany. Są one konsekwencją dynamicznych zmian politycznych w samej Mongolii, jakie zapoczątkowane zostały w latach 90. XX w., ale też zmian, jakie nieomal równolegle dokonywać się zaczęły w Chinach.

Podstawą ekonomii Bulganu było w czasie naszych pierwszych badań pasterstwo i hodowla zwierząt – pięciu podstawowych gatunków zwierząt hodowlanych w Mongolii: wielbłądów, koni, bydła (w tym jaków i ich krzyżówek z bydem domowym), owiec i kóz.

Impulsem do zasadniczych zmian, jakie mogliśmy obserwować podczas wyjazdów w roku 2012 i 2013, było umożliwienie przekraczania granicy przez mieszkańców Bulganu i miejscowości Takashiken, leżącej przy granicy, po chińskiej stronie. Łatwość uzyskania dochodu z handlu odciągnęła od hodowli wielu pasterzy, powszechne jest przekazywanie stada pod opiekę krewnym i płacenie za tę opiekę, a samemu zajmowanie się handlem. Handel daje szybki zarobek, to kolejny bodziec do porzucenia hodowli i zajmowania się handlem.

Jest wiadome od dawna antropologom, jak ważnym czynnikiem definiowania własnej etnicznej tożsamości jest obecność „innych”, szczególnie jeżeli łączą się z ich wizerunkiem negatywne stereotypy. Szczególnie w odniesieniu do Chińczyków – przejawia się to niechęcią do wielu towarów chińskich, obawą przed Chińczykami i ich dominacją, a to wzmacnia solidarność torgucką. Jest więc uprawnoczniona teza, że pełnią oni istotną rolę w budowaniu etnicznej tożsamości Torgutow.

Key words: Kazakhs, Chinese Torgut, Mongolian Torgut, ethnic identity, “others”, local culture, breeding of animals, pastoralism, socialist economy, economic changes, cross-border trade, economic activity, revitalization of tradition

In 1975, the Polish-Mongolian Ethnographic Expedition, which had been in existence for quite a few years, decided to start fieldwork among the Torgut on the territory of Bulgan *sum*¹ in Khovd *aimag*². The earlier research work had been mainly conducted in Central Mongolia and concerned the Khalkha Mongols, who are the main and most numerous ethnic group in Mongolia. Although Polish researchers had had contact with representatives of other ethnic groups earlier, it was not possible to gain the necessary permission to conduct the research. The problem lay mainly with the local authorities. The situation was the same the previous year, in 1974, when attempts were made to conduct fieldwork among the Tuxa-Tsaatan³ living in the north of the country, in the Sayan Mountains, and in the taiga at the foot of those mountains. It was only after the fall of the Communist system in the 1990s and the introduction of political changes that a research visit to Tuxa⁴ became possible.

A year later, after an unsuccessful attempt at conducting research among the Tuxa-Tsaatan, it was possible to receive permission to research the Torgut, a group that due to their inhabiting the distant territories of the Trans-Altai Gobi and the high-mountain Altai pastures, seemed to be unusually interesting. There were many reasons

¹ *sum* – an administrative unit similar to a county.

² *aimag* – a province.

³ *tsaatan* (Mong.) – reindeer-breeder.

⁴ Our fieldwork was conducted in the years 2000–2002; the results were published, among others, in: Wasilewski 2002, 48–56; Mróz and Wasilewski 2003, 153–170; Wasilewski (ed.) 2008, 264.

for this choice – the long history of the Torgut, high-mountain husbandry and its peripheral nature, cut off by mountains from the rest of the country, and from the south by a desert and a very-well guarded border with China. Another reason was that their presence in ethnographic literature was extremely limited.

The research work undertaken at that time was quite pioneering, as there was very little available information about the Trans-Altai Torgut. The ethnographic information that could be accessed came primarily from Russian researchers working at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. Mongolian scholars also did not devote much attention to the Torgut; it was not till the 1960s that Luwsanbaldan conducted linguistic fieldwork among the Torgut. The situation after World War II was not conducive to conducting research in that region. For many years it was an area of conflict and the activities of various partisan groups. Then the border between Communist China and Mongolia, the latter being a country subordinated to the Soviet Union (also a Communist country but China's main geopolitical opponent in that part of the world), made it very difficult for foreigners to do anything there. However, thanks to the consent accorded Polish researchers by the Mongolian authorities, it was possible, together with scholars from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, to start fieldwork among the Trans-Altai Torgut⁵ in 1975. The work was continued in the following years.

The natural barrier of the Altai range separates the Torgut region and Bulgan *sum* – the location of our research – from the Mongolian interior. Open space spreads out towards the south and the south-west in the direction of Xinjiang Province in China. It was primarily the Torgut who lived in this area, although Kazakhs made up quite a numerous community in Bulgan *sum*.

The Torgut of Bulgan *sum* were part of a larger and more differentiated community of the Trans-Altai Torgut who were separated by a state border from the Torgut living in China, or to be more precise, in Xinjiang. They still remember their origins, common ancestors and kinship connections with the Torgut of Xinjiang. However, by 1975, they made up a community that in many ways was different from the Xinjiang Torgut. This difference is mainly due on the one hand to Chinese politics, including the imposition of Chinese and the cultural dominance of the Han people of China, while on the other, to their Mongolian surroundings and the administrative and economic structure which was in force in Mongolia in the 1990s.

The history of the Torgut is not only interesting, but also relatively well documented. The Torgut's place among the Oyrat groups of Mongolia and their relationship to the Kalmuk ethnos was presented by Sławoj Szykiewicz (1977, 118–136) in an extended article published in the periodical *Etnografia Polska*. The same issue contained the first results and observations from this first research expedition in 1975

⁵ On the Polish side, it was Lech Mróz, Sławoj Szykiewicz and Jerzy S. Wasilewski who took part in this first expedition to do fieldwork among the Torgut.

(see Wasilewski 1977, 96–116; Wasilewski 1980, 90–96). That is why it does not seem necessary to discuss here the earliest history of the Torgut, especially as this information is not essential to show the changes that have taken place, which is the main theme of this text. I will only refer to some of its aspects, specifically those which appear in the views expressed by our informants as an explanation of the social and kinship differentiation among the Bulgan Torgut, and those which clearly illustrate the process of change.

After thirty seven years we returned our old focus of research and in 2012 fieldwork among the Bulgan Torgut was renewed⁶. The subject appeared to be all the more interesting due to the fact that over the years there had been some very important changes in that region. These are primarily the consequence of dynamic political changes in Mongolia itself that began in the 1990s, but also of those that started taking place in China practically at the same time. Although those in China are to a significant degree of a completely different nature than those we can observe in Mongolia, they nevertheless have a profound influence on the pace of changes also taking place among the Torgut of Bulgan *sum*. Comparing our observations from the 1970s with the results of our research from 2012 and 2013 (although the latter have not yet been fully compiled and written up) allows us to have an idea as to the direction those changes are taking and how deeply they are having an effect on the character of Bulgan *sum* and the life of the Torgut living there. The following has been written more in the form of an introduction, comparison and description, and as an informative text rather than an analysis. It is a presentation of our first observations and conclusions. Moreover, the present researchers are concerned with a number of different issues – as was the case in the 1970s – although here only some core ones, corresponding to those I was concerned with in 1975, will be presented.

THE BULGAN TORGUT IN THE MID-1970S

In as far as it does not seem necessary to go back to the remote past and to the ethnogenesis of today's Torgut of Mongolia and Bulgan *sum*, it is still essential to present the cultural and political context of the '70s as well as that of the present. When we first started our fieldwork there, the Torgut were not only the dominating community in Bulgan *sum*, but also composed a majority in comparison with other groups, and that is why we can use the term "Torgut *sum*" here. Besides the Torgut,

⁶ This was possible thanks to a grant from the National Centre of Science (No. NN109180440) that Lech Mróz and Jerzy S. Wasilewski from the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology and participants of the first 1975 research programme received. Other participants of this new project are: Oyungerel Tangad, Tomasz Rakowski and Tangad Danaajav, who also took part in some of the research in the 1970s.

there was a small number of Khoshuud and the more numerous Kazakhs; the Khalkha Mongols – individuals or families – worked for the administration and were employed by the higher authorities. At that time, the Kazakhs mainly inhabited the Bayan Ölgii *aimag* which bordered on the neighbouring Bulgan *sum*. It was also in the former that they had their main encampments. In the Bulgan of the 1970s, on the other hand, they were mainly involved in farming and to a certain extent in non-agricultural employment on behalf of the *sum's* cooperative and administration. They were only concerned with breeding animals to a small extent, which was mainly for their own needs anyway. Their presence, however, already started to become more persistent in the years preceding our first trip to Bulgan. They travelled from the north-west and appeared on the same Altai pastureland used by the Torgut, although they did not put up their yurts in direct proximity to the them. Also in the very centre of the *sum* or in the near vicinity there were no Kazakh yurts or any noticeable trace of any other Kazakh presence, e.g. in the form of a mosque. Of course, it has to be remembered that in those times, when atheism was being propagated as the basis of Mongolia's state ideology and Tibetan Buddhism was primarily fought against, temples belonging to other faiths had very little chance of appearing at all. Because the Kazakh presence was relatively insignificant and they were not involved in the official organisation of the *sum*, our research group decided to concentrate only on the Torgut and to conduct our fieldwork among this people.

In the meantime, the number of Kazakhs has increased significantly. Today they make up an essential part of Bulgan *sum's* population – about one-third of its inhabitants are Kazakhs. They are shepherds and herdsman but are also involved in trade in the centre of the *sum*, with their yurts and a simple mosque being at a short distance – one to two kilometres – from the centre. It is a sign and confirmation of their being firmly established in the local space. Some of them have relatives in Kazakhstan who moved there from Mongolia and Bulgan, having been financially encouraged to do so by the Kazakh authorities. This facilitates commercial travel and additionally strengthens the financial position of the group, as well as has an influence on its prestige within the *sum*. The Kazakhs' dynamism and economic position often leads to an increased dislike of them. In the interviews we conducted during our fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, the Kazakh theme and their presence appeared very often. However, because the main aim of our research was to learn about the changes in Bulgan, especially in reference to the Torgut, the Kazakhs here will take a peripheral position.

In order to understand the nature of the changes taking place, at least a brief outline of the background of how the Torgut functioned in the 1970s is necessary⁷. Apart from the administrative and Communist Party authorities, teachers and shop assistants,

⁷ More details about this can be found in the article discussing the result of those first research studies (Mróz 1977, 137–153).

workers of bakeries, etc., the inhabitants of the *sum* were ascribed to the *negdel*⁸, i.e. a farming cooperative mainly concerned with the breeding of animals. To a certain limited extent, they also dealt in agricultural produce and husbandry, while some of the inhabitants of the centre worked in the horticultural research and production station. This station was quite an exceptional venture in Mongolia, being one of four such stations in the whole country. It produced fruit, melons, water melons, vegetables, and also honey, as well as sea-buckthorn juice believed to have very effective medicinal properties. These products were sent primarily to Ulan Bator, to satisfy the needs of the state and Party officials. To a very small degree was this produce available to the inhabitants of the *sum* or *aimag*. Thanks to its huge variety of flowers, bushes, trees (dwarf plum trees and Chinese sour-cherry trees) they created an amazing picture and hence the station was quite understandably called an oasis. The system of irrigational canals, through which water was brought from a nearby river – also called the Bulgan – facilitated systematic watering, which clearly differentiated this area from the neighbouring landscape dominated by a vast terrain covered in vegetation suitable only for animals. It was also quite different from the nearby desert areas.

The Bulgan *sum* has the Altai range to the north, while on the southern hill-sides the Torgut have their summer pastures, Tsonkhilt, Indert and Toshilt. The *sum*'s western border is also the state border with China, whereas its southern border runs through the Baitag Bogd range which also borders with China; to the east, on the other hand, the Bulgan *sum* borders the Uyench *sum*, also belonging to the Khovd *aimag*.

When we started our fieldwork in 1975, the Torgut of Mongolia inhabited clearly defined territories. Their earlier history, however, was much stormier and was connected with whole groups moving around extensive areas. Szykiewicz illustrated this phenomenon in the following manner:

“The history of the Torgut (...) is full of examples of spatial dynamism. And this feature has continued. It is enough to point to three great migrations during modern times. In 1922, the Torgut-Wangiin moved to Tienshan (about 600 km in a straight line) only to come back again twenty or so years later. Similarly, but in a different period, there was movement among some of the Torgut-Beiliin. In 1945, nearly two hundred Tarbagaj⁹ Torgut families moved to the Altai (about 450 km in a straight line). Movements of smaller groups can be observed on somewhat shorter distances because of the Kazakhs' encroachment, or for other reasons” (Szykiewicz 1977, 130).

The terms Wangiin, Beiliin, Taijiin refer to the Manchurian social hierarchy and the titles given to the leaders of different groups¹⁰. From the end of World War II and also

⁸ *negdel* – a state-owned farm that came into being as a result of the collectivisation of estates (animal herds).

⁹ Tarbagataj – a mountain range on the border with Kazakhstan and China.

¹⁰ For more details about the titles of leaders and their differentiation, see Szykiewicz (1977, 121); Kałużyński (1983, 174).

the end of the conflicts in the Altai, as well as from when the border was established with China, the Torgut – no matter which group they belong to – have not really substantially changed their place of residence or of their encampments.

In the past, the Torgut of Bulgan *sum* were described as “Five-*sum* Torgut” or “Five Altai *sums*”. Only five groups were subject to the *Wang noyon*: the Wangiin, Beiliin and Taijiin, with the Wangiin being divided into three groups: the Wangiin (personal shepherds and herdsmen of the Wang noyon), the Avjiin and Bagshiin. The last two groups were also directly responsible to the Wang and were governed by his family.

[In the past] “the Beiliin and Taijiin groups were subject to the Wangiin. The leader of the Wangiin group, the Wang noyon, was also the leader of the Beiliin and Taijiin groups, although they also had their own noyons¹¹. The administrative centre of these groups and the Wang noyon’s seat used to be near the border (although on the territory of China) near the Bulgan River” (Mróz 1977, 139).

At present, among the Torgut living in Mongolia, we can differentiate five groups: the Wangiin, Beiliin, Taijiin, Khovog Sair and Khoshuud. In 1975, according to many of our informants, the term “Five Torgut *sums*” meant those five mentioned groups; only a few knew that before the revolution, that is to 1921, this term had a different meaning. The Khoshuud and Khovog Sair, who then still lived in China, were not included in these five Torgut (Altai) *sums*.

Representatives of various groups worked together, often even making up mixed brigades of shepherds and herdsmen, and intermarrying, but there still existed awareness of belonging or coming from a particular group. It is necessary to point out here that the Khoshuud¹² do not have the same origins as the other Torgut groups but because they have lived next to the Torgut in the same region for a very long time, a certain unification has taken place and strong links with other Torgut groups have been established.

“This has resulted in the Khoshuud not only thinking about themselves as Torgut (Khoshuud Torgut), but are seen by others as such, even as *jinkhene* Torgut (real Torgut)” (Mróz 1977, 138).

Irrespective of the changes that took place after the revolution in Mongolia and those of the last twenty years, the old differentiation is remembered, as is the far distant past, although our informants’ stories tend to differ quite a lot. The Torgut of Bulgan *sum* still do not make up a homogeneous community; the awareness of their different origins is still present despite inhabiting the same territory or having conducted cooperative farming or creating mixed brigades; even mixed marriages have not erased the

¹¹ *noyon* – leader, ruler, prince.

¹² For more on the origins of the Khoshuud and Khovog Sair groups see Szykiewicz (1977, 121–122, 125–128).

awareness of coming from a certain group. The research conducted in the mid-1970s showed that despite the passing of time, our informants still remembered bits of their long distant past, even going back to the times of the Volga and the connection with the Kalmyks. This also referred to the history of different Torgut groups, albeit often remembered differently.

THE CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC NATURE OF THE TORGUT *SUM*

When we conducted our first fieldwork, the basis of Bulgan's economy were flocks of sheep, herds, and animal breeding, the five main breeding species in Mongolia being: camels, horses, cattle (including yaks and their crosses with domestic cattle), sheep and goats. Before I present the organisational principles and the divisions within the cooperative, it is necessary to say something about the terrain and the geographical borders within which the Torgut live and set up their encampments, as well as how they lived in the 1970s. Although in the period between 1975, when we started our fieldwork, and now the borders of the *sum* have changed slightly, this has had no significant influence on the Torgut and how they work with their flocks and herds. The changes in the geography of contemporary pasturing movements have nothing to do with the changes in the *sum's* borders or in the collapse of the cooperative. The most important factor is the changes that are of a political and economic nature. The most important grazing lands are still in the valley of the Bulgan River; this is where the majority of animals graze during the autumn, winter and spring. More-or-less from the middle of June to mid-September this takes place in the Altai Mountains. The experience of the shepherds and herdsmen, and their knowledge of the pasture land, the ability to assess the climatic conditions, have been most important when taking decisions to the change of place for the animals and their own encampments. Although the Torgut in China breed animals as well, they also farm the land and are involved in different types of agricultural jobs.

In 1975, farming belonged to the Kazakh population, whereas animal breeding was practically solely in the hands of the Torgut. Passing from the old ways of functioning and the old, pre-revolutionary economic and political manner of doing things, to the new ways of socialist Mongolia could take place in a more harmonised manner because it did not affect the basic principles of the Torgut community's existence. Their economic base and principles of functioning, which had a significant influence on the very essence of their culture, did not change much after the Mongolian Revolution. The turning-point was when the collectivisation of their herds took place, which was about 35 years after the Revolution, but by then the local population had already become used to the direction in which those changes were heading. However, even

collectivisation did not deprive the Torgut of the possibility to use the same lands for pasture as they had done previously.

Despite the changes and the passing of time, the Torgut's schema of moving around and camping is seen to be exceptionally stable. The most important changes to take place in recent history are those concerning the grazing-lands of the Wangiin group and those of the Khovog Sair group, which was due to their change of place of habitation and to their crossing over from China to where they now live. As far as the other Torgut groups are concerned, the slight changes in the pasturing schema were mainly due to the climate.

After completing the first stage of our studies in 1975, the conclusion was that despite apparent nomadic dynamism that seems to be linked to the lifestyle of shepherds and herdsmen, the Torgut's movements were actually of a very stable nature. Observing the last decades of nomadic life, the changes are extremely slight, with many years passing without anything of note happening in the existing schema. We have learnt from our interviewees that they know of numerous examples of a whole life spent only in moving between two areas, the summer and autumn-winter-spring grazing-lands, without leaving the region of encampment not only to change these grazing-lands, but even for commercial or other reasons. Hence, certain cases where people have spent even fifty years in the same valleys, never having seen a town or even any larger settlement, never mind the nearest *sum*. Thus, where it seems there is movement, in actual fact there is stability, only not restricted to one place but involving the movement of herds between a few pasture areas, on the whole grouping together two lots of grazing-lands. Thus, despite sounding paradoxical, when asked why the Torgut had returned to their old grazing-lands after a short stay in Xinjian – to where they had fled in fear of the Revolution – one of our informants said that “shepherds and herdsmen don't like moving” (Mróz 1977, 142).

Mass collectivisation took place in 1959; some of the Torgut shepherds and herdsmen were involved in this process earlier, but it was in 1959 that collective farming became the norm. From then on, the shepherds and herdsmen looked after animals that were not their own but belonged to the *negdel* – the collective farm. They could also have their own flock or herd that consisted of no more than fifty animals. All the animals grazed together, but it was the Torgut's own animals that provided them with products that went to support their families. The change in herd and flock ownership did not have any influence on their nomadic lifestyle or on any change in the grazing-lands. Although their knowledge, experience, knowing the pasture lands and the climatic conditions were decisive here, establishing norms and settling accounts with the shepherds and herdsmen on the basis of their results, and also the collective-farm authorities deciding on when the shepherds and herdsmen were to move their animals did have an influence on how they functioned. However, even the planning system concerning the moving of flocks and herds did not wholly change the way of

farming, and did not lead to the absurd decisions that often took place in the satellite Soviet countries, where centralised planning was the norm. The administrative authorities' participation usually concerned transportation, help in preparing winter shelters for the shepherds and herdsmen, and their animals, and help in preparing hay for the winter. Moreover, the cooperative was responsible for the sale of produce (milk, meat and wool) and supplied the shepherds with the necessary equipment. It was also a guarantee of veterinary care for the animals. The dates set for moving the flocks and herds mainly depended on the weather and on the natural surroundings, resulting from the abundance of different pastures and the time of breeding.

The Communist economy, i.e. economy planned and administered by higher authorities, sometimes even by state authorities, and not by the cooperative itself, did not fully destroy the order established according to the experience of earlier generations. The appearance of a horticultural station can be seen as an example of something new but farming the land was not a total novelty – grain was sown and vegetables grown much earlier in Bulgan *sum*, although to a lesser extent. In the 1960s and '70s, the Mongolian authorities started supporting the development of agriculture and increased the amount of land that was to be farmed. As farming had been a peripheral aspect of the Mongolian economy in earlier times, the attempts of the Mongolian authorities were supported by special brigades brought from the Soviet Union. They came with the necessary machines and taught a more rational and modern way of farming the land. Despite the wish to copy the Soviet Union, the Mongolian authorities were fully aware of the habits of the Mongolian society and common-sense took the upper hand. They did not try to eliminate shepherding and herding for the sake of farming the land. Despite the tendency to imitate their northern neighbour, and also the Soviet method of settling their nomadic shepherds and herdsmen, which had been the case of the Tuxa-Tsaatan, no administrative limits were imposed on breeding for the benefit of farming¹³.

THE PERMANENCE OF OLD CULTURAL NORMS

The difference between the Torgut groups during this period was mainly visible in the kind of animals they owned and their wealth that resulted from this. The type of transport they used when moving from place to place was obviously connected with this. The wealthiest groups were the Wangiin and the Beiliin – they owned the largest herds that consisted of large numbers of camels and horses: representatives of these two groups very seldom worked on the land. The poorest were the Khoshuud and

¹³ According to different, also official, publications, in this period there were on average about twenty animals per inhabitant.

the Taijiin – they had fewer animals, the majority being sheep and goats. In both of these groups – in the period before the Revolution – there was an obvious scarcity of larger animals, especially camels and horses. This was clearly visible in the fact that they used cattle for transporting their property when they changed their place of habitation (Mróz 1977, 143).

Travelling short distances – between pasture areas on summer grazing-lands in the mountains, and on autumn and summer pastureland – took place in the same way, no matter whether it was in the times of socialist economy, collectivisation, or many years before that. Camels and horses were saddled and they carried everything: yurts, household equipment, and children placed in baskets tied to the sides of camels. Both men and women, as well as teenagers, would accompany the laden animals and also keep an eye on their herds. What was then a natural scene was the Torgut dressed in no other way than in their traditional *deel*¹⁴, no matter where they happened to be, in the mountains or in the valleys of the Bulgan River. Even when they appeared in the *sum*'s administrative centre, they were dressed in the same way. So-called European clothes: shirts, jackets or suits were nearly only worn by civil servants, teachers, doctors, etc., i.e. the inhabitants of Bulgan, the *sum*'s centre. Probably the only exception were the European-type hats which replaced the traditional headgear, also among the nomadic herdsmen and shepherds, as well as occasionally sun-glasses. Although *guutal*¹⁵, the traditional Mongolian boots, were still often worn, the more popular Russian type of footwear was gradually becoming the norm.

The interiors of Mongolian yurts were also no different to what is known from old pictures and photographs. Of course nowhere were there any radios, solar panels, or satellite dishes. In some yurts it was possible to see statuettes of Bodhisattvas, sometimes small icons representing figures from the Lamaism Pantheon. There are probably two reasons why these symbols of Tibetan Buddhism were relatively rare in the yurts. First, the Communist anti-religion policy of the Mongolian authorities was why even if the inhabitants of a yurt had such a figure, it would often be hidden behind family photos or even pictures of state leaders, or heroes from the times of the Revolution. Secondly, in the area inhabited by the Torgut there were few signs of Tibetan Buddhist influence. There was no monastery and our interviewees were not sure whether there ever had been one in those parts, although they did recall old monastic centres on Chinese territory, with which certain Torgut groups had links. However, what was still very much in their memories were various magical practices that were probably mainly of an apotropaic nature, and other aspects of beliefs including those referring to the spiritual sphere. According to Szykiewicz:

¹⁴ *deel* – the traditional outer garment of Mongolian herdsmen and shepherds. It is a type of wide coat tied at the waist with a belt. The winter *deel* has a thick lining.

¹⁵ *guutal* – high boots with pointed soles turned up at the front, made from thick leather, with a decorative design.

“We came across people still remembering many features of traditional culture which, among the Khalkha, have not only stopped functioning, but are not even included in their knowledge of their own past. This concerns first of all the sphere of beliefs, the reason for this probably being the much weaker influence of Lamaism which was not able to destroy certain practices belonging to the earlier stage” (Szynkiewicz 1977, 129).

Everyday customs and mutual relations very clearly showed the continuity of traditional ways of behaviour. Offering guests tea, koumiss, *cagaan ide*¹⁶ and snuff was always part of the hospitality ritual. I am drawing attention to this as in this very private sphere significant changes can be observed. Here I am not including those aspects of life accompanying the Torgut’s lifestyle as shepherds or herdsmen in the mid-1970s that were the result of state ideology and principles governing the organisation and functioning of the cooperative, such as the idea of rivalry among different brigades, fulfilling the quota foreseen in the centrally prepared plan (presented in office buildings in the form of graphs and photographs of leaders in the labour force), as well as the so-called “red corners” in those buildings or in special yurts in brigade centres, which also fulfilled an educational role (e.g. toothbrushes, plastic dishes, and other objects that were foreign to shepherds and herdsmen were presented there).

CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE POLITICAL CHANGES

The political changes in the Soviet Union’s satellite countries were strictly connected with the changes taking place in the USSR itself; the collapse of Communist ideology, but especially the economic crash in that part of the world, i.e. the downturn brought about through central planning and central administration, was the beginning of fundamental changes in Bulgan *sum*, as well as in the whole of Mongolia. The *negdel* (collective farm) was closed and the property privatised. However, like in other parts of Mongolia, how the herds, equipment and machines were to be divided was not clear. From the formal point of view, the number of animals that could be bought for a symbolic *tugrik*¹⁷ depended on the size of the family – the number of people for whom the animals were to provide a living. However, according to many of our informants, some were able to buy a large number of animals while others only a few. In this privatisation process, it appears that unclear principles governing division, accompanied by corruption, were a common phenomenon. There was also no link between the size of the herd bought and the number of animals or the size of the family herd that had in the past been collectivised. The same happened during the privatisation of a different type of property: machines, lorries, etc. From what we were told, it seems that some

¹⁶ *cagaan ide* – white food: pieces of cheese, home-made bread, sugar cubes.

¹⁷ *tugrik* – the name of the Mongolian currency.

had much more luck than others, becoming owners of quite a lot of the cooperative's property, while others had to be satisfied with a symbolic amount.

The closing of the *negdel* was the first step towards the changes that were to take place. Deprived of the possibility of earning a wage for work performed on the collective farm, the shepherds and herdsmen were also deprived of the means of selling their farm produce and so had to become more active in finding a way to solve this problem. Only those who had worked for the necessary number of years on the farm could be sure of a pension. This money was also security for their families, sometimes even being the only means of financial support (the situation is similar among the Tuxa-Tsaatan where we did fieldwork at the beginning of this century).

For a long time after the collapse of the cooperative, the horticultural station actually belonged to nobody; the people collected the fruit and cut down the trees for firewood. It was only after some time that the new *sum* authorities, elected and not nominated by the higher authorities in Ulan Bator, decided to sell the land and the trees, i.e. what remained of the old horticultural station that had at one time been the pride of Bulgan. This was followed by further decisions to sell the farmland and also gradually privatise some of the grazing-land in the river valley. The latter was actually meadows which provided the necessary hay for the animals in winter. A noticeable sign of change immediately after arriving in Bulgan were the fences that marked the property of individual families. When we first came to this Torgut *sum* in the mid-1970s, different forms of fencing were simply non-existent in the Bulgan landscape. When we returned, they were everywhere, a sign of the local attitude to space. In the past, you simply drove straight ahead, and it was not always along a clearly defined road. Now it is sometimes necessary to drive through dozens of different streets between fenced-in plots of land, and much further away from the river and the settlement, before a wider view opens up before you. This 'chopping up' of the steppe, dividing it into private pieces, to which right was accorded by the administrative authorities, appeared in practically every interview we conducted. Our older interviewees especially had a rather negative attitude towards this type of fencing, insisting that in the past there had been no fences, that the steppe had been for everybody, and that there had been enough hay for the animals. If there was too little, then it was simply necessary to move to a different encampment.

Political changes, a multi-party system, and the principle that people took part in electing their authorities made Bulgan similar to other democratic countries. This had a significant influence on the functioning of Bulgan *sum*. However, of interest here is the continuity of those at the bottom of the organisational ladder. The collective farm had brigades. Because the farm was within the borders of the *sum* and the borders of the *negdel* corresponded with the borders of the *sum*, the brigades were actually something more than just people who produced goods. They were clans belonging to the same group, living in the same encampment, putting up their yurts near one

another, working together and providing the collective farm with produce, for which they received a wage, just like any other employed workers.

The closing down of the cooperative was the reason why the brigade system stopped making any sense, especially as it was now the individual owners of flocks and herds who had to find means to sell their produce. That is why the old historical term *bag* was brought back into use, meaning the lowest organisational level of the state. In 1975 the first brigade was made up of Torgut from the Khoshuud and Taijiin groups, the third brigade consisted of Khovaog Sair and to a certain extent Beiliin, the Torgut-Wangiin made up the fourth, whereas the Torgut Beiliin were in the fifth. The fifth brigade consisted of Kazakhs, with practically all of them working on the land, and the Torgut from different groups, working in the centre of Bulgan in horticulture and as tradesmen. The autumn-winter-spring pastureland was used by individual brigades, whereas the summer mountain grazing-land would be used by more than one brigade. The summer mountain grazing-lands called Indert and Toshilt were used by the first and fourth brigade, i.e. the Khoshuud and Taijiin together with the Torgut-Wangiin groups; the Conchilt pastureland lying further to the east was used by the third and fifth Torgut brigades, i.e. the Khovog Sair and Beiliin from the third and the Beiliin from the fifth.

As a result of the political changes and the closure of the collective farm, with the brigades also being disbanded, *bags*¹⁸ were brought into existence. In a majority of cases, this preserved the same division that had existed in the brigades. The only difference is that the leader of a *bag* is now elected from among the shepherds and herdsmen, and is not appointed by any higher authority. However, as far as their economy is concerned, the principles have not changed at all. What is a problem, though, is finding purchasers for their products. When they worked within the cooperative system, the economy was governed centrally and there were people responsible for distribution. At present, the shepherds and herdsmen have to see to this themselves. This is also the case far as farm produce and fruit are concerned.

As mentioned above, Bulgan *sum* lies next to the Chinese border, far from the centre of the country. For many decades this border was heavily guarded and closed to people on both sides. During our fieldwork in 2012 and 2013 we observed that this peripheral character of Bulgan had helped to encourage certain changes which made it possible for both the inhabitants of Bulgan and those of Takashiken on the Chinese side of the border to move backwards and forwards more freely. The Bulgan (Yarant)-Takashiken border crossing has been accessible to people from both countries since mid-December 2006, and from 2011 it has been functioning as an international crossing that can also be used by foreigners other than Mongolians and Chinese. However,

¹⁸ *Bag* – the third level of the country's administrative division which refers to a certain group of nomadic people with family links, who have common encampments. However, these encampments and the grazing-lands they use are often shared with other *bags*.

from the mid-1990s onwards there was already a certain amount of crossings taking place among the local inhabitants of both border towns, not only due to their social contacts, but also because of trade and smuggling. The inhabitants of Bulgan would go into Takashiken with meat, animal skins, certain plants and the bones of wild animals, such as wolves, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine. As far as the last mentioned is concerned, this was against the law, so it took place with the help of bribed customs officers. Bulgan, on the other hand, needed computers, cameras, television sets, as well as clothes and food. Over the last few years, i.e. since there has been a normal Mongolian-Chinese border-crossing, this border trade has dominated the Bulgan economy.

On the Mongolian side, the town of Bulgan has become a base for an organised commercial network and this is where goods are sorted for buyers on the other side of the border. Yarant, on the other hand, is a small settlement on the very border where border personnel live and where there are warehouses for goods sent into China. Takashiken on the Chinese side, which in the past was a small peripheral settlement, has grown over the years and now has quite a number of hotels, a few large shops and restaurants as well as some rather large warehouses containing building materials. There are relatively few houses or buildings not connected with trade and commerce; it appears that everything serves the purpose of amassing goods and making it a base for traders and drivers. In the streets or restaurants one seems to hear Mongolian spoken more often than Chinese. This is understandable as the trading partners are usually Chinese Torgut and Mongolians (from Inner Mongolia). Our observations on the border do not really tell us much about the extent of this trade although the number of commercial travellers crossing the frontier on foot is quite large. It is the turnover in building materials brought into Mongolia that is of greater significance.

However, what seems to have brought the greatest wealth is the illegal links between the two sides and the border guards, which we have heard about in all the interviews touching upon trade and the frontier. They are so widespread that only the wealth of many Bulgan inhabitants, changes in the way animals are bred, and the number of children sent to university in Ulan Bator and to Japan indirectly give us an idea of the extent of the phenomenon. What can be observed among traders carrying their goods across in bags cannot be a sufficient explanation for all these new hotels in Takashiken or for the number of satellite dishes attached to Torgut yurts. It is interesting to note, though, that what is carried across quite a few times per day – although in small amounts at a time – are pasta and biscuits.

There is a good road that links Takashiken with Urumqi, the capital of the autonomous region Sinciang-Uigur, which is 500 kilometres away. The Muslim Uigur make up a significant number of the inhabitants of Urumqi and of the whole region. The influx of Chinese Han and the imposition of Chinese culture on what used to be an independent Eastern Turkistan leads to frequent conflicts and attempts by the Uigur

to gain if not full independence, then at least more autonomy. It is the Uigur who are the main purchasers of the pasta brought into the country in large quantities – they do not like the Chinese equivalent – as well as all sorts of cakes and biscuits. Urumqi is a very frequent destination of many Torgut from Bulgan because it is there that they buy their televisions, satellite dishes and computers as well as clothes, some food, and other items. There are hotels in Urumqi that are geared solely towards guests from Mongolia, and mainly from Bulgan. The natural go-betweens are the local Chinese Torgut. Their speech is slightly different due to Chinese influence but despite being separated for so many decades, the memory of their former common clan and ethnic links facilitated contact the moment the border was opened a few years ago. So much attention has been devoted here to trade and to the positive side of opening up the border-crossing because this is what has very clearly led to significant changes in the economy of Bulgan as well as in sheep and herd husbandry.

As was mentioned in the introduction to this text, because the Bulgan Torgut's economy and very existence was based on their herds and flocks, it is now necessary to turn to what type of changes took place in this sphere of their activities. Just looking today at the centre of Bulgan city, which is also the centre of the *sum*, tells us a lot. Around the main square there are quite a lot of shops, especially grocery stores, with a large selection of various goods, not only Mongolian or Chinese, but also Japanese and European, e.g. French wine, Swiss chocolate, German cosmetics, different types of Polish preserves. There are also shops selling clothes, places offering photocopying and Internet services, a few restaurants and takeaways. Not far away there are two hotels, also a bazaar where you can buy milk, butter and cheese made from cow's milk and sold by its producers, i.e. herdsmen. What is especially striking is the fact that on the square there are always a few minibuses and buses ready to take people to Khovd, the centre of the *aimag*, or even as far as Ulan Bator, a distance of over a thousand kilometres; they perform the role of local taxis.

When looking back to 1975 and seeing Bulgan today, it is not difficult to note how significant the changes have been. During our first visit to Bulgan, the horse was the basic means of transport and on the square there were always a few – or even more than just a few – animals waiting for their owners who had either gone to do some shopping or to see to something, or, sitting on his horse, the rider would be talking with another who had come into town. Today it is completely different, although horses are still bred and they are still a sign of prestige. During our two recent fieldwork periods in Bulgan – our hotel is very near this square – we were only able to observe individual riders on their horses a few times, who had decided to stop in the square. In order to get to the summer Indert mountain pasture we had to rent a jeep as it was absolutely impossible to hire any saddled horses. When we were there forty years earlier there were no problems with this at all. It was the horse and not an automobile that was the main means of transport of both shepherds and herdsmen. Now we had to go into the

mountains in a Japanese jeep because this is what is used for longer distances. When looking after their flocks and herds, people use horses but when they want to get to the centre of the settlement because they need to do some shopping or have to see to some official business, they most often travel by car or by motorbike. As far as moving from place to place, to autumn grazing-land, or from a valley into the mountains is concerned, not much has changed. Just as in the past, camels are laden with people's property as they carry the yurt, stove, crockery, and everything that is needed in their everyday life. Quite often, small children are placed in baskets attached to the camels' sides, and behind them come the animals, looked after by their owners on horseback. In other situations, though, the car has taken over.

Another very important and striking change is that in summer the shepherds and herdsmen are no longer dressed in the traditional Mongolian manner. The *deel*, a long type of coat with long sleeves, which is convenient for protecting your hands while travelling in unfavourable weather conditions, and which is tied at the waist by a cloth belt, has been replaced by so-called European clothes. While moving from one encampment to another, the *deel* is an indispensable item – it protects one from the cold and wind – but on the summer pastureland people are dressed in European styled clothes, made in China, and bought in the Bulgan shops. Not once in the mountains did we see a child dressed in a Mongolian *deel*.

What was probably most surprising was the number of solar panels, satellite dishes, and television sets. These are also from China. Their presence has greatly hastened the process of changes and knowledge about the world. A very significant change in the yurt's interior décor is also connected with this. As was mentioned above, despite the anti-religion state policy, there would very often be small altars directly opposite the entrance to the yurt, i.e. in its most convenient spot. In the past, although sometimes hidden, they were on the whole fully visible. It was like this during our first visit to the Torgut, during the times when the state was fighting against religion. A huge change has also taken place in this respect. In many yurts the altars and Buddha statuettes have been replaced by a television set. This does not mean that different magic practices and belief in demons or omens are a thing of the past. Maybe fewer people could say anything on this subject but there is no doubt that this aspect of local Torgut culture has survived and is very much alive. It is probably connected with the fact that Tibetan Buddhism is rather weakly represented here. The absence of a Lama temple in the 1970s was understandable, whereas the altars and holy pictures in the yurts pointed to the presence of religion. In Bulgan today there is a small Buddhist temple that is practically deserted. It is looked after by two monks who have not had formal religious education and are not there on a permanent basis. What is also surprising is that next to the temple there is a so-called *ovoo*¹⁹, built of sticks, which can

¹⁹ *ovoo* – a ritual pile of stones, less often of branches, which is a place where offerings are laid for the local spirits.

usually be found in mountain passes or on their summits, by the roadside in a steppe, where offerings are laid for the spirits. This sign of traditional Mongolian beliefs, however, has nothing to do with Lamaism. Moreover – and this is of importance here – this small temple does not play any significant role in the life of the inhabitants of Bulgan. In comparison, a small mosque standing a few hundred metres from the town centre is a very important place for the Kazakh population where they meet to talk and pray.

However, another type of link between the Bulgan Torgut and Tibetan Buddhism is worth attention. We learnt from a few of our interviewees that in the past the Mongolians and Torgut would sometimes go on a pilgrimage to the highly revered Buddhist monasteries in Kumbum and Labrang in Xiahe (in the Chinese province of Gangsu). When the Chinese-Mongolian frontier was set up after World War II, this was impossible but now, when travelling to Urumqi is something quite normal, people are once again able to go on a pilgrimage to these monasteries. However, it is difficult to assess how many only say they would like to go on such a pilgrimage and how many Mongolian Torgut actually make the journey. The answer is probably only a very few, as the Mongolian language heard in both places is usually that of pilgrims from Chinese Inner Mongolia.

Referring back to the border trade taking place, the shepherds and herdsmen themselves are fully aware of the negative influence it has had on pastoral life and the breeding of animals. In the 1970s there were not many more than a hundred animals per family. They were responsible for the grazing animals and their health, they processed the milk, saw to the wool, etc. Among this number there were also animals from their own flocks and herds. The ease in which profit could be made from trade was the main attraction, which in turn had a detrimental effect on the breeding of animals. A general trend is also to give their animals into the care of a relative, paying him to look after them so as to have more time for their trading activities. It is not uncommon to find one family or one yurt-holding that does not have the hundred animals or so animals under its care, as in the 1970s but, rather, up to a thousand, of different species, whose owners are members of their immediate or extended family. It is obvious that it is not possible to take proper care of so many animals at one time. Another factor having an influence on the present situation is that many young people are studying in Khovd, Ulan Bator or even in Japan, which for many seems to be almost a mythical land of prosperity and unbridled positives. The only problem they may face today in travelling to Japan is money.

As can be seen from the above, trade means a quick income and this provides additional encouragement to give up breeding animals. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Russia, only a few hundred kilometres away, which used to be such a popular destination when the economic changes first took place, is no longer an attraction for the inhabitants of Bulgan. China on the other hand is a country with

which commercial exchange takes place but there is a strong dislike for this country's products, e.g. food, and for the Chinese themselves.

During the last few years another way of earning easy money has appeared: gold-digging. This is done not by building a mine but by searching the desert lying to the south of Bulgan, in the direction of the Bajtag Bogd Mountains, with the help of a metal detector. An appropriate licence can be obtained for a fee from the local authorities. However, in the rush for this golden income, the diggers use large machines that also destroy vast stretches of land. After they leave, the terrain often looks more like a lunar landscape than anything else. Special patrols organised by the local authorities that are to protect the land from devastation are not at all effective. It is presumed that some of the local fortunes have been made thanks to this gold rush.

Another result of the political and economic changes that started in the 1990s, and which are also due to the opening of the frontier, is various forms of local activity. With the help of families who have settled there, shepherds and herdsmen sell their products – meat, skins, etc. – to larger urban centres, especially to the country's capital, Ulan Bator. We have been told that the owner of what used to be the horticultural research and production station had bought it when it was privatised. He had then spent a few years putting the place in order again, i.e. fencing off the huge terrain and buying the necessary machines, and then had restarted production. The owner had now not only started to deliver his own fruit and honey to the shops of Bulgan and the neighbouring *sums*, but had also started selling preserves made from his own produce further afield. Equipment bought in China has made it possible to offer photocopying services, develop photographs, etc. Services of this kind can be observed in many places. However, what is of great importance is the ambition of many inhabitants of Bulgan to be able to send their children to university to the centre of the *aimag*, to Khovd, to the capital, or even abroad (also to Europe, although mainly to Japan). Obviously, if it were not for these economic changes, this would not be possible. Taking the whole country into consideration, it is a fact though that this peripheral Bulgan has become an important place in Mongolia and that quite a large number of former Bulgan inhabitants now live in Ulan Bator. Another important form of activity concerns the organisation *Torgon nutag* founded by a group of rich people who have their roots in Bulgan and whose aim is to promote both the Torgut and Bulgan groups. They have also funded a park in Bulgan itself and finance different forms of promotion of Torgut identity.

It is at this point that it is necessary to look at how Torgut identity is defined. This was not something that came to the foreground in our fieldwork in Bulgan in the 1970s. The most important form of identity was the awareness of being a Torgut, or to be exact, being a Torgut who belongs to a specific clan (being a Wangiin-Torgut, a Beiliin-Torgut, etc.). The Mongolians and Kazakhs definitely formed a presence there but it would be difficult to say they were necessary for the Torgut to experience their

own Torgut identity. Animals were looked after by other shepherds and herdsmen, hence they cannot be compared to the Tuxa-Tsaatan who were identified through their reindeers and thanks to which they stood out among other Mongolians, no matter which subgroup they belonged to. Living in close vicinity to the reindeer herdsmen were the Mongolian Darkhat, for example, who bred five different types of Mongolian animals. The increase in the Kazakh population, frequent contact with the Chinese on the other side of the border, awareness of the significance of the economic growth and more wealth generally have helped to awaken interest in Torgut identity and start the search for its signs and symbols. This can be explained by the number of publications of local activists, teachers and amateur researchers concerning the Torgut and their past. The same can be said of the children's folk ensemble and the initiative concerning the revitalisation of the local museum. It was here that a photograph of a girl in traditional Torgut clothes was placed centre stage. This photograph, which I took during our first visit and gave to the museum the following year, was an illustration of a reality that, even then, had practically disappeared; these traditional clothes were among the items then being collected for the museum. According to the present curator of the museum, during the subsequent changes that took place, the photo was appropriated by a member of the local authorities. Thus we can say that it is an important sign of the Torgut's cultural identification. The same can be said about the designs – it is difficult to describe them in any other way – of “traditional” clothes for the needs of the folk ensemble, especially the children's folk group. The Torgut's traditions and culture – even if devised and created today – are a clear sign of the complexity of the phenomena defining the nature of the changes in the period spanning our visit in 1975 and the Bulgan of today.

When defining one's own ethnic identity, the importance of the presence of “others” – especially if negative stereotypes are linked with their image – has been a well-known fact to anthropologists for a long time. This role of “others” is performed today by the Kazakhs and Chinese. In the 1970s, the strongly guarded border separated them from the Chinese, while the Kazakhs were a minority group and not very numerous. Both ethnoses were absent in Torgut self-identification. In comparison, after forty years and significant political, economic and social changes, the presence of both the Kazakhs and Chinese has become very visible and is accompanied by strongly articulated stereotypes, especially in reference to the latter. This can be observed through their dislike for many Chinese products, their fear of this nation and of their dominance, which only strengthens Torgut solidarity. Hence, the claim that they fulfil an essential role in building Torgut ethnic identity is a valid one. An important place in this process is the presence of television aerials and satellite dishes that develop knowledge about the world and are an encouragement greater question one's own ethnicity. This acquired knowledge also contributes to the general increase in affluence and the economic role of Bulgan and the Torgut.

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