

---

# SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 245

March, 2014

---

## Dogs and Herders: Mythical Kinship, Spiritual Analogy, and Sociality in Rural Mongolia

by  
Gaby Bamana

Victor H. Mair, Editor  
*Sino-Platonic Papers*  
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA  
vmair@sas.upenn.edu  
www.sino-platonic.org

# SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

FOUNDED 1986

*Editor-in-Chief*  
VICTOR H. MAIR

*Associate Editors*  
PAULA ROBERTS                      MARK SWOFFORD

*ISSN*  
2157-9679 (print)                      2157-9687 (online)

SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS is an occasional series dedicated to making available to specialists and the interested public the results of research that, because of its unconventional or controversial nature, might otherwise go unpublished. The editor-in-chief actively encourages younger, not yet well established, scholars and independent authors to submit manuscripts for consideration. Contributions in any of the major scholarly languages of the world, including romanized modern standard Mandarin (MSM) and Japanese, are acceptable. In special circumstances, papers written in one of the Sinitic topolects (*fangyan*) may be considered for publication.

Although the chief focus of *Sino-Platonic Papers* is on the intercultural relations of China with other peoples, challenging and creative studies on a wide variety of philological subjects will be entertained. This series is **not** the place for safe, sober, and stodgy presentations. *Sino-Platonic Papers* prefers lively work that, while taking reasonable risks to advance the field, capitalizes on brilliant new insights into the development of civilization.

Submissions are regularly sent out to be refereed, and extensive editorial suggestions for revision may be offered.

*Sino-Platonic Papers* emphasizes substance over form. We do, however, strongly recommend that prospective authors consult our style guidelines at [www.sino-platonic.org/stylesheet.doc](http://www.sino-platonic.org/stylesheet.doc). Manuscripts should be submitted as electronic files, preferably in Microsoft Word format. You may wish to use our sample document template, available here: [www.sino-platonic.org/spp.dot](http://www.sino-platonic.org/spp.dot).

Beginning with issue no. 171, *Sino-Platonic Papers* has been published electronically on the Web at [www.sino-platonic.org](http://www.sino-platonic.org). Issues 1–170, however, will continue to be sold as paper copies until our stock runs out, after which they too will be made available on the Web.

Please note: When the editor goes on an expedition or research trip, all operations (including filling orders) may temporarily cease for up to three months at a time. In such circumstances, those who wish to purchase various issues of *SPP* are requested to wait patiently until he returns. If issues are urgently needed while the editor is away, they may be requested through Interlibrary Loan. You should also check our Web site at [www.sino-platonic.org](http://www.sino-platonic.org), as back issues are regularly rereleased for free as PDF editions.

*Sino-Platonic Papers* is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 543 Howard Street, 5th Floor, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Dogs and Herders:  
Mythical Kinship, Spiritual Analogy, and Sociality in Rural Mongolia

Gaby Bamana<sup>1</sup>

University of Wales

I am always astonished by the number of dogs in rural Mongolia. This abundance might seem to be easily explained in the context of a pastoral herding economy, but service in herding is not the only explanation Mongolian herders put forward — they more often talk about dogs as humans' best friends (*nokhoi khunii nökhör*). Herders in Mongolia love their dogs — in contrast to their Asian fellows (e.g., people of China, Vietnam and Korea), by whom dogs may be disliked, and for whom dog meat is dinner!

It is my intention in this paper to explore features of the relationship between herders and dogs through an analytical discussion of the social categories of mythical kinship, spiritual analogy, and the social relations of solidarity that include dogs and humans in rural Mongolia. This discussion offers an ethnographic contribution to the analytical configuration of sociality (Long and Moore 2012) as well as a discussion of inter-agent relations (Viveiros de Castro 1998, Sahlins 2011) that emerge from our understanding of human identity.

The underlying argument of this ethnographic description is that the presence of dogs near the home in rural Mongolia has impacts on human subjectivity as well as on the configuration of social networks. The inclusion of dogs within social networks as the human's mythical and social kin opens up to an inter-agent aspect of kin relations that, if I can paraphrase Long and Moore (2012:1), dethrone humans from commanding — although remaining in — the palace of sociality. In other words, the configuration of dog and human relations in rural Mongolia moves our understanding of sociality beyond anthropocentrism while suggesting

---

<sup>1</sup> Gaby Bamana, Ph.D. candidate, University of Wales (UK); affiliate researcher, National University of Mongolia.

sociality as a network of processes connecting different entities whose agency impacts on individual subjectivity.

Analysis of research conversations I conducted and observations I made between 2010 and 2011 suggests that, in spite of the difference in species, herders considered dogs to be kin to humans (*neg yas*) because dogs are believed to share the same ontological nature as humans (*neg töröl*). Thus, dog and human spirits are connected (spiritual analogy), and one practical implication of such connection is the social relationship of solidarity in everyday life.

To present this case, I will first introduce an ethnographic narrative about dogs in rural Mongolia. Secondly, I will engage in a discussion of the "social relations of solidarity," an expression I borrow, slightly modified, from Sneath's (1999:141) description of kinship and social networks in rural Mongolia.<sup>2</sup> I suggest mythical kinship and spiritual analogy as the cultural ideologies that sustain the relationships between dogs and herders in everyday life.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the meaning of mythical kinship and spiritual analogy legitimizes social relations of solidarity that include dogs and humans together as kin members.

The following discussion opens up to a significant aspect of relatedness that builds sociality on processes that connect humans and non-humans beyond the social category of blood (or natural relations), social alliances between humans or their symbolic construction thereof. In this discussion, I use Sahlins's (2011:2) term "mutuality of being," which means "being intrinsic to one another," to describe the relationship between herders (human) and their dogs (non-

---

<sup>2</sup> In the context of precariousness of resources that characterizes the pastoral economy of rural Mongolia, solidarity is key to ensuring readiness of support and the construction of social capital that is necessary to survival on the steppes. Sneath qualifies social networks in rural Mongolia as "social relations of obligation." I suggest "solidarity" instead of "obligation" because aspects of social interdependence and reciprocity distinguish networks and alliances in the social processes of rural Mongolia

<sup>3</sup> My understanding of ideology in this paper is in the line of Geertz (1973:203) according to whom ideologies are cultural systems that serve in "defining (or obscuring) social categories, stabilizing (or upsetting) social expectations, maintaining (or undermining) social norms, strengthening (or weakening) social consensus, relieving (or exacerbating) social tensions." However, considered as a system, cultural ideologies are not systematic because the meanings they encompass are symbolic, ambiguous, and multivocal.

human). This relationship presents sociality as the connecting agent according to their spiritual analogy, or that which makes them what they are.

Lastly, some concluding remarks will summarize the main insights in this discussion.

### **Dogs in Rural Mongolia**

One of the lessons I learned from my early years as a student of the Mongolian language was that, as a guest approaching a herders' settlement, I needed to follow a hospitality protocol. The protocol required, among other things, that the guest shout loud the expression "*nokhoigoo khorios*," or "hold your dogs," before going close to the residential *ger*.<sup>4</sup> Whether there was a dog present or not, the expression was meant to inform residents about approaching guests and strangers. The Mongolian scholar Sampildendev (1999:30) explains that, as guests approach the camp, the woman or any child of the residence would come out of the *ger* and hold the dog, if there were one, and invite the guests inside the home.

As I understand its meaning, this hospitality protocol implies the assumption that there usually is a dog at each herder's residence. Even if it is a puppy, the protocol is part of what herders consider a tradition that implies something they ought to do. Furthermore, the requirement to "hold the dog" is not only meant to prevent unfortunate attacks and to announce guests and strangers. As I shall explain further, the expression "hold your dog" was also meant to be a greeting to the dog, which is considered to be a member of the extended family, whose ascribed spatial position (*nokhoi suudal*) is located outside the *ger* and beyond the threshold.

I have tried my best to respect this hospitality protocol, although it did not prevent my getting a dog bite in Baruunburen County, Selenge Province, in 2010. Similarly to the dog that bit me, most dogs in Mongolia had black coats (*khar nokhoi*), and there is a practical reason for this. Herders prefer black dogs because this color distinguishes dogs from wolves, the main livestock predator in rural Mongolia. Coat color helps livestock discern which is the guardian dog and which the gray predator. Even in the southeastern region of Mongolia, which has a limited wolf presence, most dogs are black.

---

<sup>4</sup> A *ger* is a round shaped felt tent used as a residence in Mongolia and other regions of Central Asia.

Black dogs are said to be the best dogs. Indeed, the color of a dog's coat is believed to connect to the quality of its heart, and black dogs are thought to have a "white heart" (*tsagaan zurkh*). "White" in this case has only the symbolic meaning of what is best and finest (Dulam 2007a:16–20). The attribution of "white" as the color of a black dog's heart is meant to conceal the symbolic negative meaning of the color black. Also, these black dogs are said to have four eyes (four-eyed dog, *durun nudtei nokhoi*). Herders count as eyes the two brownish dots located at the front of the head of the dog. These "eyes" are said to see any evil spirits in the night, especially during moonless pitch-dark nights.

The second most popular dog in rural Mongolia was brown (*shar nokhoi*). In conversations with herders, there were suggestions that brown dogs were not a breed native to Mongolia. The native Mongol dog breed known as the *bankhar* is black; it has become scarce.

Dogs in herders' settlements do not react to strangers and guests all in the same way — not like the dog that bit me, for instance. At a reindeer herders' camp in Tsagaan Nuur, Khuvsgul Province (April 2009), my host's dog was not interested in the presence of a few strangers around the home. I was told that this was a hunting dog (*anch nokhoi*), whose training and primary responsibility were game hunting, not guarding domestic premises and property.

Therefore, according to their training, dogs in rural Mongolia had various jobs that more or less defined the social positions that connected them to their human masters and served to channel services and emotions between the partners. I suggest that dogs in rural Mongolia were respected and generally loved for the high quality of the work they performed, rather than primarily based on any economy of affection with their masters. Herders praised and admired their dogs' performance. Dogs deserved their herders' affection. There were also cases where herders negatively commented on their dogs, especially senile dogs, which they qualified as "lazy" because of "being useless and doing nothing but lying down all day long."

Similar to that of any other household member, the dog's job was important in the pastoral economy's division of labor. Accordingly, a dog that takes care of the domestic premises and property is a guardian dog or *khotch nokhoi*. The guardian dog is the partner of the master of the house. It has the duty of ensuring the safety of the domestic premises and property, especially through the night. As much as the master should sleep only lightly at night, so should the

guardian dog. It is important that these two form a team to protect the herd against predators during the night. It is the man who answers to the dog's barking.

This partnership is not limited to guarding the domestic premises. Herders take their dogs to the pasturelands away from home. Such a dog is known as a herding dog or *malch nokhoi*. The herding dog helps in herd management and in preventing a predators' attack. When taking the herd on a multiple-day grazing journey (*otorlokh*), a dog might be the only companion to the herder. In this same mode of companionship, a dog may also be a companion or *khany nokhoi* for individuals living alone, especially females.

In most cases of companionship for a woman, a dog replaces a male partner, as it is both a companion and a helper in herding. In Telmen County, Zavkhan Province (2011), I was told a folk story about an elderly and lone woman who used a dog's services to take care of the herd, guard the domestic premises and property as well as offer companionship inside the ger.

As one would understand from the above story, the classification of dogs that I have mentioned here is very fluid and overlapping. In fact, most dogs perform more than one job. In this division of work, the dogs' jobs connect them directly to the (male) household master. In most cases, a dog somehow absorbs the master's job. It replaces him as the companion and partner to a lone woman. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that any mention of a dog as a companion was usually in relation to a woman. To a man, a dog was rather a work partner.

Furthermore, it is only as a companion that a dog was allowed inside a ger. Otherwise, dogs were never allowed to enter the ger at any time. Herders explained that a dog entering a ger presages misfortunes to fall upon that particular household, in the near or far future. The belief goes so far as to say that a dog jumping onto the roof of the ger presages a death to fall upon that particular household. However, one should also understand that there is a practical reason for preventing dogs from entering the ger, where foodstuff (e.g., meat) is stored in the open.

Similar to other household members who are ascribed symbolic positions inside the ger according to age, gender and social rank, a dog's ascribed position (*nokhoi suudal*) is located just outside the ger, by the door on the right side of the threshold. The dog's eating bowl (*iduur*) is usually set at this side. It is intended to be from this section of the domestic space that a dog performs its main domestic duties.

This spatial classification is connected to the hierarchy of agents in the social process. In fact, as I have discussed at length elsewhere (Bamana 2010), classification in ger domestic space is related to the agents' social positions of power. As much as the man, who is ex-officio the household master, has his ascribed spatial position at the upper left side closer to the domestic shrine (the most honorific place inside the ger, ascribed to deities and the spirits of the ancestors), the position for agents of lower social position is by the threshold (the least honorific place inside the ger). The dog's spatial position outside the ger — beyond the threshold — points to its hierarchical position in the household membership classification.

I should stress that the above-mentioned classification of social space is an important indication of the inclusion of dogs and humans in the same social network. Being at the threshold does not mean being less human, rather it implies being socially lower than others, which is a variable and relative position. I suggest that a configuration of a social space that includes a hierarchy of entities (in this case, dogs and herders) implies a framework for inter-agent relations. Of all the entities and species around the ger, herders include only dogs, deities and the spirits of the ancestors in their ascription of social positions in the domestic space.

The triad, "human-beast-God," as per the ancient Greek classification (Lloyd 2011), and its hierarchical pattern of relationship, is engraved in the social classification of the domestic space. Consequently, social space classification on the ground reflects the social network of entities whose interaction impacts individual subjectivity. The subsequent inter-agent relationship is maintained through a variety of social practices that construct processes and patterns of sociality. In everyday life, herders treat their dogs with respect, shown in the fact that, as a member of the extended household, a dog eats from the family's food, but, following the hierarchical order of food service, the household master is served first and the dog last.

What is remarkable for the present discussion is that, of all the domestic animals in rural Mongolia, only dogs have personal names. Even horses, the herder's other best friend, are not given personal names.<sup>5</sup> In a recent journal article about dog names in Mongolia, Mongolian scholar Serjee (2013:211) suggests that dogs have names because they are the only animals

---

<sup>5</sup> Horses are identified according to their age, gender and coat color.



herders own in small numbers, explicitly about one or two dogs per family. I do not share this opinion as the number of dogs alone cannot justify the fact that they are the only animals to bear personal names. Other domestic animals such as cats or large birds (e.g., eagles) are also owned in small numbers (very small indeed!) but have no names.

I suggest that dogs have personal names because herders consider them as being of the same nature as the human, in which capacity they are members of the extended family. As such, dogs are identified by personal names as is any other family member. Further, the inclusion of dogs into human social networks of relatedness is induced by the relation of interdependence and reciprocity in herding activities, where a dog is able to assist and double for humans in herding activities. Also, it is the dog's position vis-à-vis the herders' main property (*ömch khöröngö*), composed mainly of the ger and the herd (Humphrey 2002:68–69), that indicates its position vis-à-vis the human family. As a matter of fact, a herder considers a dog not as part of his personal property; rather it is a part of the family.

In the context of rural Mongolia, a family is to be understood as people who depend on the same property (ger and herd) for their livelihood and are under the authority of a single household master. A dog looks after the family property (*khot manakh*), its livelihood depends on this property and it is under the primary authority of the household master. Dogs are members of particular families (*ailyn nokhoi*), rather than being the personal property of individuals.

In order to indicate the special position of dogs in the human network of relatedness, herders identify their dogs with personal names. As I shall elaborate later in this discussion, names are important in the ideological construction of subjectivity and social identity. Most dog names reflect their physical features, and similarly to human names, they are meaningful and expressive of moral and social expectations. Serjee (2013:211–212) suggests that herders expect their dogs to be strong like a tiger, majestic like a lion, fast like an eagle and fierce like a dragon.

### **Mythical Kinship, Spiritual Analogy, and Ontological Likeness**

An enquiry into the quality of the relationship between Mongol herders and their dogs cannot ignore the very popular mythical kinship that connects the Mongol ancestors with the wolf, the dogs' ancestor. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols* (SHM § 1), a thirteenth-century

Mongol chronicle that is a major source of Mongol history traces the mythical origin of the Mongol ancestors to the coupling of a blue wolf and a fallow doe. The genealogy in the first chapter of the SHM describes the origin of Chinggis Khan, the uniting ancestor of all the Mongol people, in the following language:

Chinggis Qahan was born with his destiny ordained from Heaven above. He was descended from Boerte Chino, whose name means 'greyish white wolf', and Qo'ai-maral, the wolf's spouse, whose name means 'beautiful doe,' who crossed the lake and settled at the source of the Onon River at Burqan-qaldun, where Batachi-qan was born to them.<sup>6</sup>

In his comments on the SHM, Igor de Rachewiltz (quoted by Srynnikova 2006:287) suggests that the mythical ancestor couple of the Mongols, the wolf and the doe, were real animals as in the totemic ancestry of the ancient Turks. Human ancestors assimilated later to these animals. As a literary device, this genealogy connects the primeval couple of the wolf and doe to the Mongol ancestors, establishing thus a mythical kin relation.

A significant feature of this ancestry is that the male ancestor figure through whom the mythical descent is traced, and who connects to the Mongol patrilineage ideology, is a wolf, the dog's ancestor. Therefore, dogs and the Mongols have a common mythological male ancestor connecting them as kin members. During my field research, herders mentioned that dogs and humans were of the same "yas" or "of the same bones," which is the symbolic element that connects individuals of the same kin line (*yasan töröl*) through a male ancestor.

This ideology sustains the practice of everyday life in which humans and dogs are members of the same household and where they respectively hold hierarchical positions in the domestic classification of agents. This goes to the point that a destitute human is popularly considered to have become like a dog (*khun bish, nokhoi*), whereas a smart dog (*unkhantai nokhoi*) is considered to have become like a human (*khun shig nokhoi*). In spite of their hierarchal differentiation and difference in species, herders believe that dogs and humans are of

---

<sup>6</sup> SHM translation by Urgunge Onon (2005)

the same substantial quality, or the same "interior," to use Descola's term (1996). This quality allows one to substitute for the other in social processes, and for their spirits to be reincarnated into each other's bodies after death.

Indeed, a dog's substitution for a human as well as the eventual reincarnation of a dog spirit into a human body and vice versa is possible because dogs and humans are, herders believe, of the same nature (*neg töröl*), and they relate through spiritual analogy and mythological descent. In order not to overlook differences in physical features, herders indicated one such difference between these two kin members (dog and human), as that a dog has hair and a tail which the human has not. This echoes Descola's (1996) suggestion according to which different subjects constitute different ontologies that have different physicality (e.g., body) and yet a common interiority (e.g., spirit).

I shall elaborate a little more on this ontological relation by considering the local understanding of human identity and what I describe as a spiritual analogy between humans and dogs. According to Mongol metaphysics, a human being is made of a body and a spirit (Hamayon 1990:328–330), yet it is the spirit that is the essence of the human subject. This is also applicable to other beings that have a spirit, such as dogs and horses. At death, the spirit leaves the deceased body to re-incarnate into a different body and assume a different form of life. Mongol folk knowledge suggests that there is a cycle in forms of life allowing individual spirits to incarnate into different bodies and assume different forms of life.

The Mongol metaphysics described above makes different entities "spiritual kin," and this is not a privilege widespread among indigenous people, as Pedersen (2001) would have us believe. The ancient Greeks and their philosophers (e.g., Pythagoras, Empedocles) considered all beings as kin because of the potential transmigration of their souls, which makes it morally wrong to take the life of any being (Lloyd 2011). Lloyd (2011) also mentions Christian metaphysics, which considers the soul as the essence of the human to the point that the first missionaries to the Americas (and Africa) wondered if the local people had souls — in which case they would be human and consequently related to themselves. In Christian thought, the soul is immortal because it either goes to hell or to heaven.

The Greek and Christian metaphysics I mention resonate in Mongol metaphysics, according to which the spirit never dies. The spirit is reincarnated in various bodies, allowing it to live on. Therefore, different forms of life are temporary and mutable. Nevertheless, Mongol metaphysics does not suggest that just any spirit can be reincarnated into just any body. For a spirit to use a different body, there should be a spiritual analogy between the subjects. As for the human and the dog, Mongol herders insist that not only are their spirits believed to change places during their life time, but also a (former) human spirit may be incarnated in a dog body after death and vice versa.

During my field research, I often heard comments about human personalities who may have been dogs in their previous lives, or about individuals wishing their spirits to be reincarnated into dogs, as the best fit for that human spirit after death. Moreover, herders mentioned that a newborn baby can be ontologically any being in the making until it is given a personal (human) name, a few days after birth. Therefore, beside differences in physical features, a personal name identified a baby and distinguished it from other beings. A name that is given to a baby can be said to be given to the spirit inhabiting that baby's body. Consequently, in case of demise, the human body (corpse) usually has no name for the Mongols. Herders do not refer to a deceased person by its (former) name. Expressions such as *taaligaach* are often used to refer to the deceased.

In the Mongolian shamanistic belief, a human spirit may temporarily leave the body to wander away (*suns kholdokh*); in fact, this often happens and may cause chronic illness for the person. In such cases the ritual specialist uses its personal name to call back the spirit (*suns duudakh*). The name, one can argue, is the name of the spirit and not of the body. A name is important in identifying a human spirit and in distinguishing that human spirit from any other spirits; it bestows human identity onto the body. A corollary affirms that a dog has a personal name because a dog has a spirit which shares in the same ontological nature as the human spirit.

Upon a person's death, for a few days thereafter, people usually perform charitable work on behalf of the deceased so as to allow his/her spirit to move on and be reincarnated into a different body and into a form of life that is ontologically suitable. These acts of charity are meant to prevent the spirit from staying around and clinging to the living. Among the many acts

of charity people perform, feeding dogs and young children are regular good deeds. People give away presents to make up for any shortcomings that would prevent a deceased person's spirit from moving on. Next to children, dogs are chosen among other animals because of the view that dogs share the same nature as humans and are possible vessels for the reincarnation of human spirits.

Therefore, after death, a human spirit may be incarnated into a dog's body. There is a mutability of forms of life as spirits go around. At the spirit level, there is an ontological kinship or "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2011:2) between different forms of life that are susceptible of being recipients of the same spirit. In fact, it is because of the spiritual analogy with dogs that herders retrace a kin relation. After death, a dog spirit may reincarnate into a human body. Consequently, at death, herders make sure to cut the dog's tail so that when "coming back" as a human, it has no tail, which according to the oral literature (Dulam 2007b: 136), would be embarrassing for a human.

Therefore, the spirit in a human being may be a former dog's spirit and vice versa. Although different by their bodies (physicality), dogs and herders are related by their spirits (interiority). Ontological relatedness between a dog and a human is maintained through ideologies of spiritual analogy and mythical kinship between the two species. It is very remarkable indeed that, although dogs in social life are of any gender, yet the dog figure regularly mentioned in mythological (see, e.g., *The Secret History of the Mongols*) and ideological narratives was often a male dog. A male dog figure connects the dog to the human family line in a society where descent is usually traced through male members.

This conception has consequences pertaining to the way herders treat their dogs in everyday life. I suggest the social relationship of solidarity as an analytical frame for understanding human-dog relations in rural Mongolia.

### **Social Relationships of Solidarity and Patterns of Sociality in Everyday Practice**

A narrative about patterns of social processes that include herders and their dogs can take into account any practices of everyday life. Such a narrative is able to convey cultural representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986) about identities in the social relationship of power. This narrative

accounts for a few processes that channel meanings of human and dog identities in a social relationship of solidarity that expands social networks and alliances beyond anthropocentric boundaries.

As a guiding principle in everyday practices, herders are reminded that it is important for human masters to treat their dogs respectfully, avoiding hurting the dogs' feelings (*nokhoi gomdookh*). Hurting a dog's feelings may affect its relationship with its master and consequently have an impact on the quality of service and reliability. The mention of humans as masters does not suggest a master–slave type of relationship. On the contrary, the human is the dog's master in his capacity as (male) household master (*geriin ezen*) and as the dog's principal partner in herding. The human is the dog's master just as he is the master of any other household residents.

In order to present the meaning of the dog's domestic membership, I will draw a parallel between the process by which herders acquire a puppy and that by which they recruit a new bride. Both processes are concerned with the recruitment of a new family member through exchange and alliance rather than through descent. To illustrate further this process, I will also evoke dog burial ritual. What happens in between acquisition and burial runs according to patterns of relationships of solidarity in a context of pastoral economy, where agents' rights and responsibilities are determined through kinship positions and the division of work.

As far as the acquisition process is concerned, I was repeatedly told that herders do not buy a dog or a puppy. Instead, they acquire a puppy from another herding family that is known to have a good breed. It is interesting to understand the terminology used for this process, which is the same as the one that is used in asking for a woman's hand in marriage: *nokhoi guikh* (*request a dog*) – *khukhen guikh* (*request a woman's hand*). Nevertheless, in both cases, it is not a free acquisition as herders give a non-return token (*garyn beleg*) to the owner or/and, in other cases; they offer a meal of wheat and meat to the mother-dog (e.g., in the Gobi region).

In either case, the owner or the parents do not set a price nor indicate the kind of gift to be received in exchange for the puppy. It is up to the claimant to consider the kind of gift to be offered. Among the items people give are: a tea brick, a blue scarf (*khadag*), money with a blue scarf, candy and homemade biscuits, etc. In the Gobi region, where herders offer a meal to the puppy's mother-dog, I understand this offer as being in the same line as presenting a bride's

mother with gift tokens as a reward for bestowing her daughter. The implied meaning is similar to that of the gift package presented to the puppy owner.

In the cases of both marriage and puppy acquisition, it is an exchange in recruitment of a new family member, in which gift tokens are considered a reward to the owner or parents for the work of raising the puppy and to compensate for the imminent loss. It is sometimes considered very exceptional and fortunate if a puppy turns up at a family's ger. In the context of the sparse population of rural Mongolia, herders know at once where it came from. If this happens, it is considered heaven-sent, and this is a good fortune for the welcoming household. Such a puppy should be allowed to stay.

But it is possible that, on the contrary, if a dog turns up at a ger, it will not be welcomed because herders believe that such a dog might bring in misfortune and should not be invited to stay. It is considered in this case that a dog that escapes from its master is an unfaithful companion, and faithfulness and reliability are fundamental qualities in the partnership between a dog and its master. In the case that a puppy escapes from a ger, it is very unfortunate, and herders suggest that such a puppy may have sensed some "negative spirit" (*muu yor*) in that household that prevented it from staying. This indicates that there should be some kind of compatibility between a puppy and its new family.

The above mentioned belief echoes a similar one about any new family member (a child or a new bride) that needs to "fit" into its new family or simply that he or she needs to be fixed in order to stay. When a family experiences regular child loss, the incompatibility between the newborn and the family has to be fixed (*uur togtokh*). The same applies to a new bride, who has to be "fixed" into her new family (*ber togtokh*).

Let us get back to the puppy acquisition. After a claimant has presented a gift token, both sides have to determine the best time to collect the puppy. In the religious context of Mongolia, herders have to make sure that this takes place on an auspicious day. This practice is similar to the marriage process according to which the bride gifts are presented in advance and an auspicious day is picked for the groom's family to escort the bride to her new family.

When a puppy is brought home, it is kept inside the ger, fed on milk until it is strong enough to eat solid food (*bor idee*), which is usually served outside the ger. There is a restriction

about keeping the puppy inside a *ger* where there is a toddler. A family cannot raise both a puppy and a baby. People believe that a puppy and a human baby have analogous spirits that may swap if both are kept together in the same place. It is beyond discussion here that herders believe a dog has a spirit which is similar to the human, and that the two are distinguished from each other by the kinds of names they are given, as I have suggested earlier. A human name distinguishes a human spirit from a dog spirit and vice versa.

Normally, it is during the time the puppy is kept inside the home that it is ritually given a name. This is very similar to a child's name-giving ritual, which takes place about a week after birth. From the information I gathered in Telmen County, Zavkhan Province, and Dalanzadgad County, Omno Gobi Province, herders used a version of a name-giving ritual for dogs that is similar to the human baby name-giving ritual. Accordingly, the family members gather, and each writes a name on a piece of paper and places it in a bowl of wheat. A name will be picked by a designated family member (e.g., the youngest of the family, or a monk invited for the occasion).

After a name is chosen, it is whispered into the baby's ear (right ear for the boys and left ear for the girls). As for the puppy, it is rather told its new name, although some herders suggested that a name is whispered into the puppy's ear. In Telmen County, Zavkhan Province, a few pieces of meat were tied together with a few names, and the first piece of meat the puppy picked up was considered its choice of a name.

As days pass by, the puppy will be trained according to the job it is intended to perform. This training takes place outside of the *ger*, which is its domestic location. As the puppy grows, it will not be allowed inside the yurt anymore. Thereafter, herders suggest that a dog does whatever work a human does. In other words, a dog's job is valued as similar to other family members' jobs in a pastoral economy. The dog fits into an economic context where labor is generally recruited among family members. It is the dog's performance of a variety of duties that is the channel of the affection economy it shares with humans.

In its performance of herding activities, a dog provides the services of preventing predator attack and managing the herd. Therefore, interdependence and reciprocity are key features for understanding the quality of the relationship between dogs and herders. With regard to these key services, the herders have learned to rely on their dogs as much as the dog has



learned to rely on the master. Herders read dogs' mind as much as dogs read herders' mind ("shared intentionality" [Sahlins 2011:230]) for mutual understanding and collaboration as work partners, establishing thus a framework for the communication of meanings. This prompts faithfulness and reliability as important features of this partnership (*nokhoi ezend unench*).

To sustain such a relationship, the master needs to treat the dog with respect as an extended family member. Herders do not beat their dogs as part of any disciplinary or training process (*nokhoi khoshiglokh*). On the contrary, a herder talks to his dog, and the tone of voice expresses various emotions including anger and disappointment. As part of their good treatment, dogs are well fed, and feeding is part of their training. As mentioned earlier, in its capacity as an extended family member, a dog eats the leftovers from the family meals. There is not a specially cooked dog meal. On the contrary, throughout the day, women collect leftovers from human meals to be presented to the dog mostly in the evening.

If it happens that there is a new member to join the household, it is often a custom that he/she is introduced to the household, including the dog. Very specifically, in a wedding ritual, there is a stage at which a new bride is to prostrate herself to the dog outside of the ger (*nokhoid murgukh*) as part of her becoming a new member of a particular family.

Understandably, what practically ties a dog to its human family is the contribution to the herding economy and the subsequent emotional economy. The maintenance of this bond is based on a dog's reliability as an ally or on the quality of the social relationship of solidarity. This is a relationship between two agents (inter-agent relationship) who learn to communicate the meaning of their identity and construct patterns of sociality. Although each agent considers the other from a particular perspective, this inter-agent relationship goes so far as to assume that a dog may replace a human in everyday practices because of this spiritual analogy (*nagts baikhgui nokhoi n oroltsono*, in the absence of the maternal uncle, his dog takes over, goes the saying).

When it comes time to die — and dogs are said to know this time — dogs go away and find a suitable place to die. Dogs, herders say, do not die close to their homes. Indeed, a sick and/or senile dog will disappear from home for few days, and then herders will look for its body. When found, a dog's inhumation is similar to the human inhumation ritual. In shamanistic Mongolia, a human body was not buried, but rather the body was placed on a propitious high

place such as on a hill top between rocks, or left to the predators on a steppe well away from human settlement. A dog's body is treated the same. The dog's corpse is placed on a hilltop to decompose, yet people still cut its tail to allow the dog's spirit to move on and eventually be reincarnated into a human. The tail is placed like a pillow under the dog's head or is stuck into its mouth.

### **Conclusion: Identities, Meanings and Inter-Agent Relationships**

Understanding identities through the analysis of patterns of sociality is useful as it emphasizes the open-ended quality of social processes of networks and alliances among different member beings as "nomadic actants" (Chau 2012:133). As the case of dogs suggests, humans and non-humans refer to mutable forms of life while suggesting social networks and alliances as a mode of social relationships among entities of analogous ontological nature. In other words, dogs and humans in rural Mongolia are mutual beings whose network and alliance is reported in mythological accounts and ideological narratives.

Agent identities are multivocal as they belong to different networks that are the locus of identity formation and perception. The temporality and mutability of forms of life allows agents to incorporate a variety of networks suggesting relations across different forms of life at both the ideological level as well as in everyday life. Accordingly, processes of sociality operate across different species of social beings, implying that the social is relevant beyond its anthropocentric application. Indeed, the cultural construction of social space that includes a variety of entities points to the extension of social networks and alliances beyond the human.

Therefore, social beings that have an analogous ontological nature communicate/perceive meanings of their/other's identity and relate to each other in processes of solidarity. However, it is also important to note that these processes are part of their time and history. They change over time following social changes to the point that, in urban Mongolia (e.g., Erdenet city), dogs usually have an ambiguous identity: as a pet or a fellow being. Nevertheless, as Dulam (2007b:136) would write, whenever the Mongol people think about the origin of human beings, they know that humans and dogs have been together since the beginning.

## Bibliography

- Bamana, Gaby. 2010. "Men on the Right, Women on the Left: Symbolism and Analogy in Mongolian Ger Domestic Space," *Mongolian Studies: The Journal of the Mongolia Society*, vol. xxxii.
- Chau, Adam. 2012. "Actants Amassing (AA)." In *Sociality: New Directions*, ed. Nicholas Long and Henrietta Moore, 132–155.
- Clifford, James, and George Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Descola, Phillipe. 1996. "Constructing Natures: Symbolic Ecology and Social Practise." In *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Descola Phillipe and G. Palsson, 82–102. London: Routledge.
- Dulam, Sendenjav. 2007a. *Mongol belgedel zui II. Ongiin belegdel zui, Zug chigiin belegdel Zui*. Ulaanbaatar.
- Dulam, Sendenjav. 2007b. *Mongol belgedel zui IV Zuud, Zon Sobihgiin belgedel zui, Tsaгyn belgedel zui*. Ulaanbaatar.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hamayon, Roberte. 1990. *La chasse à l'âme. Esquisse d'une théorie du Chamanisme Sibérienne*. Nanterre, France: Société d'ethnologie.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 2002. "Rituals of Death as a Context for Understanding Personal Property in Socialist Mongolia," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (NS) 8: 65–87.
- Lloyd, Geoffery. 2011. "Humanity Between Gods and Beasts? Ontologies in Question," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17(4): 829–845.
- Long, Nicholas, and Henrietta Moore, eds. 2012. *Sociality: New Directions*. London: Berghahn Books.
- Onon, Urgunge, trans. 2005. *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan*. Ulaanbaatar.
- Pedersen, Morten. 2001. "Totemism, Animism and North Asian Indigenous Ontologies," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 7(3): 411–427.

- Sampildendev, Kh. 1999. *Orkh Geriin Mongol Yoson*. Ulaanbaatar.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 2011. "What Kinship Is (Part One)," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 17: 2–19.
- Serjee, Djambaldorj. 2013. "Mongol Nokhoin neriin Tukhai," *Oyunii Khelkhee*, I (09): 211–213.
- Skrynnikova, Tatyana. 2006. "Semantics of the Names of the Mongols' Forefathers." In *Kinship in the Altaic World: Proceedings of the 48th Permanent International Altaistic Conference, Moscow 10–15 July, 2005*, ed. Elena Boikova and R. Rybakov. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Sneath, David. 1999. "Kinship, Network and Residence." In *The End of Nomadism? Society, State and the Environment in Inner Asia*, ed. Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, Edouardo. 1998. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4(3): 469–488.

Since June 2006, all new issues of *Sino-Platonic Papers* have been published electronically on the Web and are accessible to readers at no charge. Back issues are also being released periodically in e-editions, also free.

For a complete catalog of *Sino-Platonic Papers*, with links to free issues, visit the *SPP* Web site.

[www.sino-platonic.org](http://www.sino-platonic.org)