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Religious, Ecological, and Historical Politics in Inner
Asia, followed by Varia

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Introduction: banner communities

- 1 In a recent essay on the continuity of administrative structures in Mongol history, Christopher Atwood proposed that the basic unit of social organization in Mongol history since the medieval imperial period has been the appanage community, which he characterizes as:

a defined territory and people assigned to the hereditary jurisdiction of a particular nobleman and his descendants, as a unit of local government [...] [comprised of] a group of people who maintain a perpetuity of rights and membership in appanage resources, who limit these privileges to insiders; and who are discouraged from active contact with outsiders. (Atwood 2013, p. 2)
- 2 He also provides for under- or over-sized units that "borrow much of the symbolic equipment of the appanage to mark out a more manageable slice of territory and membership as community" (*ibid.*). In the period of Qing rule in Inner Mongolia being in 1636 and into the early 20th century, the limit of the Mongol appanage community was the "banner" (*qosiya*). Aside from material resource, rituals bound appanage or banner members together, as "religious communities having common banner Buddhist temples and cairns (*obao*) where ceremonies were performed in the summer for the *luu*/dragons , both financed on a subscription basis" (*ibid.*, p. 5). The fiscal responsibilities of banner members included the maintenance of ritual sites as well as

providing ritual paraphernalia (Serruys 1972, pp.602-603). These community sponsored rituals, officiated by lamas, government officials, and representatives of Chinggis Khan's lineage among the eastern Mongols of the Qing, functioned to create "a very strong sense of connection between the banner land, the banner members, and the Chinggisid ancestors of the banner nobility" (Atwood 2002, p. 30). Thus, material or financial interests intersect with ritual at the banner level, the appanage community with an aristocratic center, through communal support of rituals consecrating land and the people identified with that land.

- 3 The appanage community model is an ideal type, which is to say that it is supposed to align with most cases in the historical Mongol ecumene but not intended to be a totally accurate representation of Mongol social organization in all cases for all time. The appanage community model emerged from questions about the nature of Mongol territorial administration, land inheritance, and how the people that inhabited those territories managed their interests in material resources. It challenges previous scholarship that attributed Mongol socio-political organization to "tribalism" or other ill-defined concepts of descent and lineage and situates aristocracy and their privilege as a central conceit of identity allegiance (cf. also Sneath 2007, *passim*). Atwood deems sub-banner communities – citing the examples of Mergen vang Banner in Qalqa and the Qatagin in Ordos – exceptions that prove the rule: Mergen vang Banner's matri-lines were protecting material interests through descent, only through the female instead of the male line, and therefore did not deviate from the model of banner protection of resources (Atwood 2013, p. 12). The matri-line simply replaced the aristocratic line that defined the appanage, while the material interests of the community stayed the same. Put another way, in previous scholarship, anthropologists focusing on kinship, i.e. patrilineal versus matrilineal descent, obscured the underlying logic of the banner community which was rooted in heritable access to and protection of pasture and water resources (cf. Potanski & Szykiewicz 1993, pp.97-101). The Qatagin, on the other hand, were a sectarian group defined by themselves and by banner members as internal outsiders; they were known as a cultic group based around the worship of the "Thirteen jealous gods" (*arban yurban ataya tngri*), and only initiated others into the group via marriage, bilaterally via sons and daughters in law (Qurčabayatur 1987, pp. 84-86; Bawden 1977, *passim*). Atwood argues that their marginalization in Ordos society was due to them forming a society around a secretive religious practice, strict rules of descent, and a legend of migration from outside Ordos. Therefore, the Qatagin's relatively small community membership – about one hundred households or the size of a smaller sub-banner administrative division, a *sumu* or *bay* – shows that they were exceptions that prove the rule to appanage communities. Atwood adds that these sub-banners were "not recognized juridically and were always liable to reversal by strong banner leadership" (Atwood 2013, p. 12).
- 4 The usefulness of counter-examples that serve as "exceptions that prove a rule" diminishes as more of these counter-examples are explored. My purpose here is not to disprove Atwood's main thesis about appanage communities, rather it is to suggest that counter-examples – sub-banner, non-normative communities defined by themselves and others as community outsiders and outside the law – are more significant when we consider community inclusion defined through rites instead of by descent. To be clear: Atwood's goal was to disprove the long-held scholarly assertion that descent and lineage were the central organizing principle of Mongol society by offering a different

model that corresponded with what Mongol sources actually say. Ritually defined groups, including the Qatagin but also other groups in Ordos such the Erköüt and Darqad, monastic banners in Qalqa, the ecclesiastical estates of the Jebcündamba qutuytus and Gobi Noyan qutuytus, the various groups that rejected Buddhism along the Qing-Russian border, and other non-normative communities, present alternatives of community identity dynamics based on cultic practice, allegiance to a particular figure, direction or scope of ritual intent, and so on. In some cases, such as the Erköüt of Ordos, the community subverts the "symbolic equipment of the appanage" by rejecting Chinggis Khan and Borjigid supremacy and offering blood sacrifices in Buddhist rituals. Atwood's focus on material interests such as pasture borders, above-ground resources, and taxes is born out of period specific Mongol-language sources, the most richly documented period being the Qing (1644-1911) and more specifically the period after about 1850, for which there is the most variety of accessible primary documents pertaining to details of routine banner administration (Atwood 2013, p. 2). Among those sources and historical ethnographic works about Inner Mongolia more generally, Ordos is disproportionately represented (Bulag 2002, *passim*; Elverskog 2006b, p. 118, n. 34). Chief among the works on Ordos sources cited in Atwood's essay are works by the eminent Mongolist Antoine Mostaert, and so it seems appropriate to begin a critique from within Ordos with an ethnographic report written by Mostaert about a sub-banner community – the Erköüt.

The Erköüt of Ordos

- 5 In 1934, Mostaert wrote the only detailed account of the Erköüt community in Ordos based on an interview with an Erköüt man Mostaert met in Beijing¹. Erköüt people were of particular interest to Antoine Mostaert because he believed they were descendants of a Yuan-era Oriental (probably Syriac) Orthodox community that served the Mongol court, and therefore represented a forgotten Christian past of the region in which Mostaert was a Christian missionary (Mostaert 1934a, p. 3). Later members of the mission maintained interest but conducted no further research into the Erköüt community specifically. Joseph Van Hecken commented, somewhat misleadingly, that Mostaert's report described a group of Ordos Mongols practicing "Nestorianism, which could have remained alive in Ordos", taking Mostaert's Christian hypothesis further than Mostaert himself (Van Hecken 1949, p. 200). Owen Lattimore, in his introduction to Louis Schram's study of Mongour social history, referred to the Erköüt as "crypto-Christians", noting the etymological possibility that Erköüt derives from the word for Christian clergy in Mongol, *erke'ün* (Lattimore 1954, p. 8). He advances a hypothesis that a community he came across in Barköl, Xinjiang also derived their group name from the medieval *erke'ün* plus the common northwest Chinese diminutive *zi* to arrive at *erhunzi*. He asked the locals the meaning of the word and they said it meant "bastards" or "half-breeds", Lattimore suggests this is an incorrect folk etymology and *erhunzi* was actually a Sinified form of *erke'ün* (*ibid.*, pp. 8-9, n. 21). Other scholars have been more circumspect in drawing these conclusions; Altanzaya, for example, concludes that despite superficial similarities between ethnonyms or family names that resemble *erke'ün* or *erke'üd* across Mongol and Oirat sources, the names are not related to one another (Altanzaya 2001, p. 6).

- 6 Aside from these inferences about the Erköüt, there are many other instances of scholars finding scattered remains of Christian and seemingly Christian survivals and monuments in Inner Asia, and the Erköüt are little more than a footnote in the history of western scholars' search for Christianity in Mongolia. In general, discoveries of this kind serve more as a "mirror interpreting the interpreter", as one scholar put it, and highlight "the importance of understanding the author's background and, indeed, motivations" (Halbertsma 2015, p. 286). Despite that, Mostaert's report about the Erköüt is the only such document available for this group, and despite its brevity is invaluable for the study of recent Inner Asian society and history.

- 7 As for Mostaert his credentials as a careful researcher are well established; his publications include several authoritative works in the field, and he spent about twenty years residing in Ordos as a missionary during which time he was also an active scholar of Mongol language, texts, and history. He was and continues to exert an influence in the fields of Mongol history and linguistics and commanded the respect of his colleagues (Rachewiltz 1999, p. 93). From what remains of the interview, it is clear that Mostaert asked his interlocutor, Garma (Гарма) Bansar, several questions about religious symbolism and practices, but he does not overinterpret Garma's answers in a misleading way. Most importantly to establishing the credibility of his report and ensuring that by the missionizing motive did not distort too much is the inclusion of much information that seems to contradict Mostaert's own thesis about the Christianity of the Erköüt. By the end of the report, it is only the etymology of the name Erköüt which gives credence to the Christian survival hypothesis; Mostaert concedes that "as a result of their prolonged contact with the shamanists and Lamaists, they seem to have preserved only very vague reminiscences of their ancient Christianity [...] the very name they give to their god is [...] that of a Lamaist divinity, and many of their religious practices are very close to certain practices found among the Lamaists" (Mostaert 1934a, p. 16).

- 8 The report itself is a brief seventeen pages and based on Mostaert's interviews with Garma. Garma was an illiterate forty-five-year-old man, and uncle to the banner prince of Üüsin in Ordos. His expertise as a witness is derived from a life spent participating, observing, and administering affairs near Erköüt territory. On the subject of religion, which is what interests Mostaert the most, Garma confesses ignorance because the formal aspects of Erköüt religion are kept secret to all but the clergy (Mostaert 1934a, pp. 6, 16). The report consists primarily of descriptions of life customs, public rituals such as burial and marriage, and some administrative particularities. Mostaert drew out the particular features of Erköüt life which contrasted with other Ordos Mongols. It is in Mostaert's apparent preoccupation with the community's religious life and their association with death that his motivation in creating the report is most obvious; it also provides us with a snapshot of a community which maintained a very distinct ritual life from the rest of the banner of which they were a part.

- 9 Mostaert summarizes the main points of difference between the Erköüt and Ordos Mongols by stating what the Erköüt refrain from:

[...] in front of their door, one does not see the raising of the *k'ī mori* [*kei mori*] (a pole with banners covered with prayers), they do not visit the temples of lamas [...] and have no respect for them; they do not practice divination, ignore the worship of fire, ovoo [...] springs, etc. For them, Chinggis is a national hero and nothing more. They do not consecrate livestock [...] to the gods, do not worry about auspicious or inauspicious days, do not sacrifice at tombs, and have no fear of the

dead. The many impurities and defilements so much feared by the lamaists do not exist for the Erköüt. They do not believe in transmigration. (*ibid.*, p. 6)

- 10 The Erköüt lived in southern Ordos, split into two main groups between the Üüsin and Otoy Banners. Although they previously lived further to the south, in an adjacent territory within the administration of Shaanxi province, they were pushed into Ordos by the steady encroachment of Chinese agriculturalists into their territory (*ibid.*, p. 4). Mostaert posited that the Erköüt "probably came with the other Mongols who, in the second half of the 15th century, settled in the loop of the Yellow River" and were organized by the Qing empire as Ordos league in the 17th century (*ibid.*, p. 17). This conception of the origins of the Ordos Mongols derives from the importance of the Chinggis Khan cult; the Ordos Mongols – sometimes part and sometimes all – are said to be descended from the group that was appointed as early as the time of Khubilai Khan to preserve the cult, and were told to move to Ordos to protect the cult and its paraphernalia from the ravages of the Qalqa-Oirat wars (Bulag 2010, p. 58). The Qatagin shared in this myth as well, with some people connecting the worship of the thirteen *ataya tngri* with the Chinggis Khan cult itself, and others saying that the thirteen *ataya tngri* were invited "from the north" (Qurčabayatur 1987, pp. 84-86, 91, n. 1). *Ataya tngri* is an appellation of the heavenly diety or dieties associated with *Köke möngke tngri* or Eternal Blue Heaven and offered sacrifices for the benefit of cattle herds and protection of horses, especially among Buryats (Heissig 1980, pp. 49-59). The Qatagin included themselves in the myth of *ataya tngri*'s migration from the north by retelling their own real or imagined history of immigration, but they and the Erköüt were not non-Mongol, and banner members did not accuse them of being banner outsiders in any legal sense with material repercussions. For example, the banner administration did not charge them the surtaxes that normally accompanied such a status (Atwood 2013, p. 5, 2002, pp. 78-80, 210-211). Instead, their social stigmatization as outsiders was defined by their ritual divergence from the other banner members (cf. Atwood 2013, p. 13).
- 11 Mostaert recorded several slanderous phrases uttered by banner Mongols about the Erköüt, but none are related to their relationship to territorial issues of the banner. They include the idiom "an honest person doesn't approach an Erköüt; a person with a clean *deel* doesn't approach soot", and less poetic turns of phrase such as "bad Erköüt", "black-boned Erköüt", and "the heretical Erköüt" (Mostaert 1934a, p. 6)². The former idiomatic expression was also recorded as "an honest person doesn't approach a Čaqar" but referred to the Čaqar sub-banner division known in Ordos as *qariya* (En. *subject[ed]*, in other parts of Mongolia usually called *sumu* or *bay*), which also served as a surname for people from the Čaqar *qariya* (Mostaert [1941] 1968, pp. 180a, 516b; Mostaert 1934b, p. 24). One group of the Erköüt, moreover, lived in the Čaqar *qariya* (Mostaert 1934a, p. 4). The Čaqar of Ordos, like most Ordos Mongols, traced their history in the region to the cataclysmic events of the 17th century, when they were pressed westward by the Manchu army and settled as a military unit after the defeat of Ligdan khan, but in their rituals they invoke Aru qangyai and Altan tebsi, connecting them to the general origin myths of Ordos Mongols (Chiodo 1999, pp. 233-234, 241).
- 12 The phrase "black-boned Erköüt", on the other hand, could be seen as referencing the proximity of the Erköüt to the Chinese; in Ordos "black-boned" referred specifically to Chinese people, and not Mongol commoners (i.e. non-nobility) *per se*, although many scholars maintain that black-bonedness marked off base status among Mongols (Mostaert 1968, p. 336b)³. The term *qaraču*, related to blackness and denoting a common

or base status, also did not apply to the Erköüt; Mostaert points out the Erköüt "do not depend on a *taiži* [*tayiji*] (descendant of Tšingis khan [Chinggis Khan]) like the other ordinary people (*xara'tši k'un* [*qaraču kümün*]) among the Ordos. Each group of Erköüt has their own priest, whom they call *baçši* [*baysi*] 'master'" (Mostaert 1934a, p. 5). One consequence of this was not being liable to perform duties (*alba*) or pay taxes of any kind, in Ordos a privilege usually associated with the officiators of the Chinggis Khan cult, the Darqad (*ibid.*).

The Qatagin of Ordos

- 13 Erköüt social categories did not match the rest of Ordos – even the commoners were not properly *qaraču* because allegiance to a noble (*tayiji*) was a non-starter in a community for which "Chinggis is a national hero and nothing more" (*ibid.*, p. 6). The Qatagin, on the other hand, did define themselves as *qaraču* despite not having nobles in their community, for example in this poem written by the Qatagin Ts. Damdinsürüng:

Qalqa Mongol's shepherd,
Qatagin clan's nomads,
Damdinsürüng of *qaraču* roots,
dwelling in a foreign land. (Qurčabayatur 1987, pp. 95-96)⁴

- 14 The Qatagin maintained secrecy about their genealogy, allegedly recorded in their *Secret teachings* (*Niyuča sudur*), but they did not include nobles among their ranks in Ordos (*ibid.*, pp. 84-96)⁵. Like the Erköüt, the community leader of the Qatagin was also their religious leader, among the Qatagin called the "black master" (*qara baysi*) (*ibid.*, p. 153, n. 1). Thus, neither group was territorially defined by the jurisdiction of hereditary noblemen, the primary feature of an appanage community. Rather, the social authority of both groups was thus based on their ritual or religious practice, and that is what estranged them from banner Mongols; as one slur put it, the Erköüt were heretical. On the other hand, the Qatagin, while they were socially marginalized for their secret religion, obeisance to their black master, and careful maintenance of their lineage, were not called heretical by other banner Mongols (at least it is not recorded in sources known to me).
- 15 The difference lay in the intention of ritual; the Qatagin performed rituals for the benefits of all Mongols, even if those rituals were secretive, while the Erköüt performed rituals for their community alone. The Qatagin rituals invoked the Thirteen *ataya tngri* for the benefit of all Mongols, and manuscripts invoking *ataya tngri* were circulated far outside the Qatagin community (Bawden 1977; Rintchen 1975, §§26-27). Generally, *ataya tngri* was associated with thunder and lightning, and warded off disasters such as famine or devastating weather phenomena (*jud*) for all Mongols, as in the following passage taken from a prayer to the five *ataya tngri*s, "to Qan Ataya tngri, highest of all, spreading his dear great voice and spreading his mercies over the whole Mongol people, pacifier of the times, removing snow and starvation" (Bawden 1977, pp. 200-201). A Qatagin offering prayer similarly opens with this stanza:

My *ataya tngri* khan,
with your booming voice of thunder,
echoing in the valleys of rocky gorges,
unifier of all Mongols' apprehension. (Qurčabayatur 1987, p. 74)

- 16 The Qatagin are associated with the worship of Heaven or the sky (*tngri*); a tradition connected to pre-Buddhist or supra-Buddhist, pan-Mongol rituals; when other Mongols read prayers for *ataya tngri*, they invoked the name Qatagin in them as well (*ibid.*, pp. 1-81; Rintchen 1975, §§26-27).

Red Damjin and Erküüt rituals

- 17 The Erküüt's offerings, sacrifices, and worship were secret and only the name of the deity to whom they sacrificed, *ulayan* Damjin (Red Damjin⁶), was widely known. Though no one saw the statue of Red Damjin, which remained bound in red cloth at all times, Garma described Red Damjin as a blacksmith riding a goat who lived in a mountain (Mostaert 1934a, pp. 6-7). Mostaert notes that the Erküüt's Red Damjin might have been connected to one of the five protector gods known as Damjin, who were popular throughout Mongolia. He is almost certainly correct to make this connection; in the Tümed and Köke-qota (modern Hōhhot) area of Inner Mongolia, not far from Ordos, there were several temples associated with the primary protector god Nayičung (Tib. *Pe har rgyal po*), for whom Dorji legba (Tib. *rDo rje legs pa*) was a companion in Mongol iconography. One of Dorji legba's emanations was Damjin garbanaybuu (Tib. *Dam can mGar ba nag po*⁷), the god of blacksmiths, always portrayed wielding a hammer and riding a goat (Charleux 2018, pp. 210-211, 227-229). The blacksmith protector Damjin was prominent in the region because of the prevalence of mining and smithing: tin, copper, and iron artifacts are found in the region dating back to the 17th century. This identification of the Erküüt deity could also have doctrinal significance, because Damjin garbanaybuu was worshipped primarily by Nyingmapas, and his temple is associated with that school (*ibid.*, 234). The Erküüt were most likely a community of devotees to Damjin garbanaybuu, following a Nyingmapa school; to what degree sectarian differences caused friction is unclear though. Visible and practical differences in ritual and custom were more important than theoretical doctrinal discrepancies.
- 18 At the commencement of the triannual beckoning fortune ritual (*dalalya*), the Erküüt religious specialist or master (*bayši*) invoked Red Damjin by saying "with teeth giant and white, with three eyes (as brilliant as) Venus" (Mostaert 1934a, p. 9)⁸. It was forbidden for lay Erküüt to memorize or recite the master's prayers, so Garma only recalled the common phrase uttered in times of danger, "guardian Damjin, save [us]", and "free me from hell for 500 years (*ibid.*, pp. 11-15)"⁹. The sacrifice of the beckoning fortune ritual consisted of goats, their hearts offered to Red Damjin, and their boiled flesh consumed by the attendees (*ibid.*, pp. 8-9). In the ritual sacrifice and consumption of goat flesh, the Erküüt *dalalya* resembled normative banner beckoning fortune rituals, with an important exception. The sacrifice and offering of a goat was not unheard of in Mongol rituals but was generally a replacement for a preferred animal or considered archaic (Chabros 1992, p. 39). Chabros identifies the Erküüt practice of goat sacrifice with Mostaert's Christian origins hypothesis, arguing that they "were less strongly influenced by Lamaism [...] and may have preserved a pre-lamaist custom" (*ibid.*, p. 103). However, offering a heart and consuming flesh in front of the shrouded statue of Red Damjin also suggests a "red offering" ritual, a controversial practice in Tibetan-rite Buddhism because of its similarity to blood sacrifices, criticized as heterodoxy by

contemporaries (Dalton 2011, pp.149-50). The flesh offering was a subversion of appanage community rituals; the controversial practice distinguished the Erköüt community from the banner and confirmed the Ordos slur that the Erköüt were "heretics".

- 19 Mongols perform beckoning fortune rituals (*dalalya*) on many occasions, but they are associated closely with *ovoo* ceremonies (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013, p. 194; Chabros 1992, p. 120 *et passim*). Mongol texts describing *ovoo* ceremonies include the beckoning fortune ritual followed by ablutions and circumambulations of *ovoos*, the completion of which was supposed to bring the following benefits:

[...] the extermination of the *jedker*-demons concerned with life and with pasture land, the blossoming of sons and grandchildren, multiplication of flocks and herds and possessions, eradication of sinister evil portents, relief from all misfortunes; relief from the three hundred and sixty *ada*-demons, from the four hundred and four diseases, and from the eighty thousand *todqar* demons which are met with suddenly, likewise the accession of good fortune, and protection on the part of the powerful great local deities who have been rendered happy [and so on...]. (Bawden 1958, pp. 39-40)

- 20 The Erköüt neither erected nor maintained *ovoos*, so they held the beckoning fortune ritual at the Erköüt temple and buried the remains of the sacrifice next to it. The Erköüt master also performed a new year's sacrifice which the lay Erköüt could not attend; they knew of it because the master would leave three holes containing the sacrifice of meat, flour, and juniper and trace a swastika in the ground between the holes (Mostaert 1934a, pp. 8-9). The swastika was the symbol of Red Damjin and was taboo to display or draw; the only other place it appeared was in the bottom of graves prior to interment, and all Erköüt were buried (*ibid.*, pp. 6-8, 14). The Erköüt *dalalya* rituals paralleled banner beckoning fortune rituals but did not complement them as the Qatagin rituals did by praying for all Mongols or venerating widely recognized deities. The difference between modelling and subverting rituals thus depends on context and content: the Erköüt rituals were not symbolic models of banner versions of the same ritual, they were distinguished in particular ways that marked off the community members and their territory from the banner, in ways that were contrary to norms and standards of the banner.

The Darqad of Ordos

- 21 The rites of the Darqad of Ordos – the official keepers of the Chinggis Khan cult who maintained the shrines of the Eight White Tents (*čayan naiman ger*) and the rituals associated the worship of Chinggis Khan – is a case of a sub-banner community whose rituals benefited the whole banner in spite of their unique status (Yu 1989, *passim*). They enjoyed special privileges in Ordos because of that status – unlike banner Mongols they were not obligated to perform duties such as manning post-roads and garrisons, and they did not have to pay taxes. They were not subject to banner authority, did not wear Qing imperial insignia, and had no seal with which to wield political authority or have it removed (Yu 1989; Serruys 1970, pp. 46-47). In these and other ways, the Darqad were like the Erköüt; their priesthood was hereditary and distinct from the Buddhist clergy (Mostaert 1934a, pp. 7-8). Unlike the Erköüt, the Darqad maintained monasteries and Darqad boys could also be monks (Serruys 1970, p. 46). There were many rituals and festivals associated with the Chinggis Khan shrine in Ordos, but the Darqad

reportedly saw three of them as the most significant: the annual sacrifices at Ejen qoyira and Sülde, and the ovoo festival at He-ji-tu in Jasay Banner (Serruys 1970, p. 47)¹⁰. In a book of rites directing the Darqad how to officiate the blessing of "the white herd" (*čayan süreg*), meaning the family of Chinggis Khan, and the type of rite that they conducted at major festivals, blessings to the state and "all the people" included in it are found throughout, as in the following passage:

Grant happiness to the Lord-qayan of an impeccable beautiful government, to the qatun, and to all your people [...] You have become a support for Ögedei qayan, you have become a force for the vast Mongol people (Serruys 1984, p. 40 *et passim*).

- 22 When the Darqad conducted rites, even those in secret, the neighboring banner Mongols knew that it was in the service of not only the banner but of all Mongols. Ordos Mongols associate their history in Ordos with the protection of the Chinggis Khan shrine; the Darqad of Ordos were the official keepers of the shrine, but banner members in Ordos shared in the sense of a historical mission to maintain the Chinggis Khan cult as well as other imperial leaders and cultural figures (Bulag 2010, pp. xiii, 58). Rituals which bound present-day people to place through the constant re-constitution of ritual sites maintained the continuity of local history, creating a sense of timelessness in the ritual acts themselves (Humphrey & Evans 2003, p. 206). The Üüsin Banner lama Lubsangčoyiray, for example, incorporated the Ordos literatus, author of the "Precious Record" (*Erdeni-yin tobči*) Sayang sečen, into a hierarchy of protective deities beginning with Chinggis Khan, thus blending together the Chinggis Khan cult with the local fame Sayang sečen in a tantric text (Elverskog 2006a, pp. 157-158; Serruys 1985, pp. 26, 28). Officials in Üüsin Banner would gather at the tomb of Sayang sečen, located in Üüsin Banner near Erküüt territory, to perform sacrifices dedicated to the Sayang sečen and Chinggis Khan (Mostaert 1957, pp. 534, 538). This blending of ancestry brought two banners together as well; the tomb of Sayang sečen was located in Üüsin – near Erküüt territory – but the eight white tents of Chinggis Khan in Ejen qoriya was located in Vang Banner. The ancestor cults were significant to the ritual life of Ordos League, extending beyond the banner boundaries. The Erküüt, on the hand, did not attach religious significance to Chinggis Khan or any ancestor. They mocked the other Ordos Mongols' ancestor worship and mourning rituals by saying, "they call out to their dead devils; they serve tea to their dead devils!" (Mostaert 1934a, p. 15)¹¹. The derision was more than just name-calling; the Erküüt maintained an aversion to the Darqad – the hereditary keepers of the Chinggis Khan shrine in Ejen qoriya whose symbolic dark clothes, round roofed houses, and lack of buttons on their hats symbolized their continuous and eternal mourning for Chinggis Khan – forbidding them to step foot inside an Erküüt dwelling (*ibid.*, p. 6; Serruys 1970, p. 48).

Mourning rituals

- 23 The disdain for the Darqad's mourning of Chinggis Khan extended to all obligatory mourning rituals. In theory, the number of days people were supposed to mourn was equal to the number of days the deceased person's essence remained in the state of existence between death and rebirth (*bar do*) (Mostaert 1957, p. 565). In practice, the number of days of mourning afforded to a person depended on their administrative rank, occupation, and then it varied for individual mourners depending on their relationship with the deceased (Van Oost 1932, p. 131). Qing administrators expected

the dependents of nobles (*tayiji*), in some cases, to mourn for a hundred days – the longest mourning period normally reserved for the death of an emperor or a parent (Mostaert 1960, p. 153). Mourning for administrative officials was communal; people wore black or dark clothes, men and women could not wear jewelry, the right shoulder button of clothes was left unfastened, and men would not shave their heads for seven days (Van Oost 1932, p. 130). People made salutations with a silent bow instead of the normal “*amur sayin-uu?*” (*ibid.*, p. 131; Kler 1936, p. 30). Regulations prohibited entertaining guests during mourning (Van Oost 1932, p. 131; Mostaert 1960, p. 152). Officials had to remove their buttons and insignia that marked their rank, with the notable exception of the border guards (Mostaert 1961, p. 144; Serruys 1977, p. 581). On the special occasion of the Emperor and Empress’ deaths in 1908, the Mongol administration changed the mourning rituals. Imperial decree changed the color of mourning to white, modeled after the mourning customs of the Qalqa Mongols. In Ordos the nobles who were appointed to attend the thirteen major *ovoos* of Ordos had to go to their respective *ovoos* simultaneously to mourn (Mostaert 1960, pp. 163, 165). Horses were prohibited from galloping, wind-horses were to be removed from the fronts of dwellings, and monasteries had to be avoided (Van Oost 1932, p. 131).

- 24 These changes in mourning rites in Mongolia were the subject of imperial edicts and local crackdowns. The Erköüt, however, did not participate in the mourning at all. This may have been on religious grounds; they did not believe in transmigration and presumably rejected the idea of *bar do* and mourning periods related to it. Or it could have been a broader rejection of the legitimacy of the banner. There are reports from Ordos of people fighting over insufficient respect shown to the families of the recently deceased, specifically for not bringing gifts (*ibid.*). Rejection of banner customs, moreover, was a rejection of the state. Mourning rituals across the Qing empire, including Mongolia, were increasingly bureaucratized beginning from the 17th century in a process of imperial legitimation of Manchu rule (Kutcher 1999, pp. 120-152). The role of Mongols in the shifting mourning policies was assumed to be one of compliance to so-called traditional Manchu conceptions of loyalty – that was obviously not the case considering the number of edicts needed to correct Mongol mourning – so violations of mourning were challenges to imperial authority (*ibid.*, pp. 178-179 *et passim*). Mourning avoidance therefore amounted a rejection of Qing imperial ritual as well as banner ritual and law.

Judicial distinctiveness

- 25 Even more striking is Garma’s claim that the Erköüt maintained their own judicial system separate from the banner (Mostaert 1934a, p. 5). The legal system of Mongolia, at least up to 1910s, was a nested hierarchy of appeals courts; in principle all banner land – including Erköüt territory – was subject to banner and league judicial authority, and they were subject to the Lifanyuan in Beijing (Bawden 1969, *passim*). On the other hand, considering “the inextricability of the legal and Buddhist systems of thought and practice in Mongolia prior to the Communist revolution”, the Erköüt’s rejection of Buddhism may have pushed them outside the fold of banner legal operations (Wallace 2014, p. 332). Whatever the reasons, the Erköüt masters judged criminal and civil cases, and the banner prince of Üüsin recognized their decisions. The masters arranged trials, could torture suspects, and mete out punishments. Death sentences were handed out

without repercussions from the banner prince; Garma witnessed the executions of two unrepentant repeat-offender thieves. After the execution the master would report to the banner prince the reason for the execution and the method. The method in all cases was live burial, because the Erköüt had a taboo about shedding blood (Mostaert 1934a, p. 5). This detail is particularly surprising because death sentences in Mongol lands all required imperial approval before the execution was carried out – banner princes could not authorize them alone. In matters of administrative jurisdiction and law, there were sub-banner communities that were independent from banner authority or subverted banner authority – symbolically or practically – by exercising their own legal power. In terms of the appanage community model, this means that sub-banner communities were not simply fractal models of larger banners, but they could ignore the banners and develop their own legal models with unique and unorthodox punishments.

- 26 As suggested by the live burial executions, the Erköüt community's way of dealing with death also ran against banner norms. In Ordos there were three usual ways to deal with corpses: interment, cremation, and exposure. Ideally, a lama would decide which method was appropriate and in the case of interment would select the spot for burial. In southern Ordos, funerals were common and coffins were even used sometimes, but not with a grave marker. Corpses were also left next to sand dunes and the sands would be disturbed to create a trickle of sand that would eventually cover the body (Van Oost 1932, pp. 128-129; Kler 1936, p. 30). Exposure of adult corpses was not practiced by the Erköüt at all, but infant corpses less than one month old were left outside where wild animals would consume them. Garma reported that "a baby under one month is not much of a human being"; similar practices existed elsewhere in Ordos, but usually the corpses of children (under ten years old) were placed in a sack and left on a busy road so that a passerby would open the sack and "give the little one a chance to fly to better worlds" (Mostaert 1934a, p. 14; Kler 1936, p. 31). The Erköüt had a joke about the banner Mongols' practice of exposing the dead: "when you die, you flesh is red; after a while, your bones are white" (Mostaert 1934a, pp. 6, 14)¹².
- 27 The Erköüt only buried their dead in marked graves in graveyards. Prior to the Muslim Rebellion of 1860-1870s, the Erköüt lived south of the Great Wall in a part of Üüsin that Shaanxi later annexed called Brown Millet Hill (Qonoy-un boro toloyai) where they maintained a large community graveyard. In the graveyard was a millet grinding stone with graves lined up around it, marked with stones inscribed with the deceased's name and short biographies. According to Garma, the Erköüt abandoned the settlement and rented their land to Chinese agriculturalists and entrusted the cemetery to a Chinese caretaker for "the protection of the bodies of their ancestors" (*ibid.*, pp. 4-5). In Üüsin, the newer Erköüt grave markers were painted red because of red's auspicious association with Red Damjin, but red was a prohibited during mourning rituals for the Ordos Mongols (Mostaert 1960, p. 150). The Erköüt did not employ lamas to determine burial method or site; they prohibited divination in the community and the family members were left to decide the burial site (Mostaert 1934a, p. 6). Since the main occupations of lamas included divination and burials rites, these prohibitions effectively kept the Erköüt from several of the most salient features of Buddhist life in Ordos, and Garma reported the Erköüt simply did not respect lamas (*ibid.*).

Kinship

- 28 Despite these socially isolating practices of the Erköüt community, they were also strictly exogamous, and parents sought sons- and daughters-in-law from the banner Mongols. Due to the banner Mongols dislike of Erköüt, banner Mongol parents were not eager to marry their daughters to an Erköüt groom and expected a higher bride-wealth in return for their daughters. After marriage, Erköüt families expected new brides from the banner to denounce Buddhism and pledge themselves to Red Damjin (*ibid.*, pp. 9-11). Banner Mongols, on the other hand, did not require Erköüt brides to renounce their religion when they married into a banner, but they did have to live in the banner. Adopted children had to follow similar rules, for example when an Erköüt family adopted a banner boy, he could marry the daughter of an Erköüt, but they would have to live outside of Erköüt territory (*ibid.*, p. 11). Lawrence Krader described them as "the maximal exogamic unit among the Mongols", due to their strict bilateral exogamy (Krader 1963, pp. 43-44). The strict exogamy of the Erköüt was not, as Krader intimates, a vestige of medieval Mongol society, it was another feature of a community which distinguished itself from the surrounding banner community through rituals and social organization.

Conclusion: rejection of banner rituals

- 29 The rejection of banner rituals set the Erköüt against the banner by denying participation and imitation of form of the ritual. Banner members both funded and participated in communal *ovoo* ceremonies, temple fairs, and other rites (Mostaert 1934a, p. 11). There were several groups that were exempt from obligatory duties including subscriptions to rituals, but they either participated in the rituals or, in the case of the Darqad, officiated them. Whether the Buddhist prayer halls of the ecclesiastical estates of incarnate lamas or the divination rites of the Chinggis Khan cult practitioners, the words uttered and actions performed in communal rituals created the reality of space and time for participants and observers. In Mary Douglas' words:
- The sacrifice is a self-referencing enactment. In structuring the community's self-perception it structures its future behavior [...] the version of the world that has been adopted itself affects the world. (Douglas 1992, pp. 250-251)
- 30 Rejection of the symbolic world created by members of the banner included a rejection of the secular order embodied by the banner authority as well – banner officials were often present and even officiated *ovoo* ritual, for example – and in the Erköüt this is vividly seen in the parallel judicial apparatus of the Erköüt described above (Humphrey & Ujeed 2013, p. 197 *et passim*; Mostaert 1961, pp. 143-145). Rejection of ritual and subversion of banner officialdom was not a borrowing of appanage community symbols and rites, as Atwood proposed, but in the case of the Erköüt was a separated ritual community at a sub- and trans-banner level of organization.
- 31 The appanage community model is good for thinking about Mongol social organization from the perspective of local material interests and their relation to Inner Asian political structures. It is a necessary intervention in a field which has a history of relying on abstract concepts such as "the way of life of the nomads" or cyclical impact theories to explain the formation of administrative politics. The model is important

because it centers Mongol social and political agency in Mongolia simultaneously at the level of the community and local power-holders. However, sub-banner and trans-banner communities such as the Erküüt demonstrate a deficiency of Atwood's appanage community model. The maintenance of subversive ritual and administrative communities in and between banners means that a theoretical reckoning of Mongol social organization must account for significant variation and alternatives. That point may be obvious, but the significance of certain "outsider" groups outweighs their apparent minority status, particularly communities formed in Buddhist ecclesiastical estates. The potential for this type of study lies not only in understanding the roles of small cultic communities like the Erküüt or the Qatagin in banner life, but also large groups that formed alternative or parallel conceptions of community and authority. Better documented groups like the ecclesiastical estates of the Jebcündamba qutuqtus created a parallel administrative system in the Qing empire whose moral vision of authority based on ritual practices specific both to a Buddhist and Mongol state, and one that eventually supplanted the Qing empire.

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NOTES

1. Mostaert uses his idiosyncratic transcription of Ordos dialect throughout the essay, so I have transcribed his Ordos dialect renderings into Classical Mongolian.
2. Respectively: sayin sanayatai kümün Erkegüd-ün dergedü bitegei oyirata, sayin debel-tei kümün kö deregedü bitegei oyirata; mayu Erkegüd; qara yasutai Erkegüd; Erkegüd ters bayina.
3. There is, to my knowledge, no contemporary evidence from historical sources that "black bone" was used to describe commoners in opposition to "white bones".
4. I am not a skilled enough translator to maintain the original rhyme, which reads: Qalqa Mongyol-un malčın, Qatagin oboý-un negüdelčın, qaraču ijayurtu Damdinsürüng, qari yañar sayuqu-dayan.
5. Specifically, the legend relates that the Qatagin progenitor, Bayanqara, was not awarded noble (*tayji*) status even though it was owed to him.
6. Damjin < Tib. *dam can*, [the one] bound by an oath.
7. Tib. *nag po* means "black", and Damjin garbanaybuu is represented as black in iconography whereas Red Damjin is red but otherwise identical in appearance.
8. Čul čayan sidü-tei, čolmon yurban nidü-tei.
9. Respectively, Damjan sakiyusu abura; namayi tabun jayun on tamu-yin orun-ača keltürigül.
10. He-ji-tu (or in Wade-Giles Ho-chi-t'u) is certainly the Chinese transcription of a Mongolian toponym, but I did not find the corresponding name.
11. Ükügsen čidkür-iyer dayudaju; ükügsen čidkür-iyer čai budaya kijü bayina.
12. Ükübesü miqa-tani ulayan, udabasu yasu-tani čayan.

ABSTRACTS

Definitions and models of nomadic-pastoral social structure are foundational to our understanding of historical processes in Mongolian society and between Mongols and neighboring polities. Recently, scholars have criticized older models with new anthropological models and historical evidence, and for the period of Qing rule in Inner Mongolia (1636-1911), identify the banner as the basic unit of social organization. This paper contributes to this scholarship by examining the significance of subversive and alternative rituals in small-scale communities alienated from larger banner communities. The Erküüt (Erkegüd), a small community in Ordos, rejected the religious life of the banner, including ritual forms such as *ovoo* worship, and were thus excluded from, and stigmatized within, the banner community. Exclusive religious and social practices are found in other communities as well, for example the Qatagin and Darqad of Ordos; however, those groups maintained ritual significance within the banner community because they upheld rituals for the benefit of all Mongols. The significance of ritual in defining communities, particularly sub-banner communities, must be considered an alternative form of community formation and maintenance.

Les définitions et les modèles de structures sociales nomades-pastorales jouent un rôle important dans le domaine des études mongoles : ces modèles sont fondamentaux pour notre compréhension de la dynamique des processus historiques au sein de la société et entre les Mongols et les entités politiques voisines. Récemment, les chercheurs ont critiqué les modèles précédents en apportant de nouveaux modèles anthropologiques et des preuves historiques, et pour la période de l'administration de la Mongolie-Intérieure par les Qing (1636-1911), ont identifié la bannière comme l'unité de base de l'organisation sociale. Cet article contribue à ce domaine d'étude en examinant l'importance de rituels subversifs et alternatifs dans des communautés de petite taille à l'écart des grandes communautés de bannière. Les Erküüt (Erkegüd), une petite communauté des Ordos, ont rejeté la vie religieuse des bannières, y compris le culte des *ovoo*, et ont donc été exclus et, dans une certaine mesure, stigmatisés au sein de la communauté des bannières. On retrouve également des pratiques religieuses et sociales au caractère exclusif au sein d'autres communautés, par exemple les Qatagin et Darqad des Ordos ; toutefois, ces groupes ont maintenu une signification rituelle au sein de la communauté des bannières, parce qu'ils organisaient des rituels pour le bénéfice de tous les Mongols. L'importance du rituel dans la définition des communautés, en particulier les communautés au sein des bannières, doit être considérée comme une forme alternative de formation et de maintien de la communauté.

INDEX

Keywords: Erküüt, ritual, religion, Ordos, community, banner, rejection

Mots-clés: Erküüt, rituel, religion, Ordos, communauté, bannière, rejet

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